

British Antarctic Survey: Oral History Recording No 3.

Archive reference AD6/24/1/3.1 = AD6/24/1/3.4

Previous reference AD6/16/1986/2.1 (CD's 1&2)

A recording of Gwion Davies, a member of the operation Tabarin Expedition, 1943 and 1946, in conversation with Miss Joanna Rae, Assistant Archivist of the British Antarctic Survey.

Date: 13th September 1986.

Location: Mr Davies' home near Conway, North Wales.

N.B. This transcript is an edited version of the full transcript of this recording, and is suitable for quick reference purposes. While this version avoids many repetitions and stumbles in the original recording, the recording must be the final arbiter.

amc 09.04.06

Joanna Rae: Could you give me an outline of your career before joining Operation Tabarin?

Gwion Davies: Well, I was born in Mostyn, Flintshire in 1917 and lived in Denbigh, North Wales up to 1935, except when I went to Quaker School in York and then, after leaving school I had a bit of time to spare between school and University, so I spent three months in Rothampstead. Experimental Station as a kind of student assistant and then went to Denmark to work at a farm for three months. Then I got a job on an auxiliary sailing coaster for a month and then as a deckhand, and then I went on to college in Cambridge. My parents had moved to Cambridge because my sister worked there at the Low Temperature Research Station, and it was cheaper for me to go to college, living at home, than it would have been living-in. My father had retired there; so I read Natural Sciences – took the Tripos there – from 1936 to '39.

Now – during the vacations – and this is part relevant to the expedition – and after spending another six weeks in Denmark on farm-work and again as deckhand on sailing coasters, I signed on as ordinary seaman/cook in a tops'1 schooner called the *Merry Miller*: she was one of the last fully sailing vessels under the British flag – she and the *Kate*, who was a two-masted topsail schooner – in fact the Master, he was a Cornishman, and the Mates and two A.B's were Humber Pilot apprentices who were doing their time, square-rig, for their training, so this counted as square-rig time for them. So, I was only three months in her during the summer: and then went back to college after that but when the war broke out I had another year's studies to do on part 2 of my Zoology course but I was called up like everybody else for National Service, and I put in to join the Navy and, when I did so, I was told to wait 'till I was called up.

Not long after, I was invited by the head of the Low Temperature Station – that was Dr Kidd – to go out on a whaler as assistant to work on some experiments in the preservation of whale meat, because Dr Kidd, who was the head of the station, he and others foresaw the need for food after the war – or possibly during the war – so they thought of using whale meat for this purpose. Now, the man in charge of this programme turned out to be James Marr: he was, of course, the famous 'Scout' Marr who went South with Shackleton in the *Quest* and so I was to help him in this experimental work. He was signed on as Whaling Inspector, and I was signed on as Labourer.

So, we sailed in this whaler the *Terje Viken*, sailing from Scotland in 1939, and got down to the Antarctic and spent the three months of the whaling season preserving and freezing and drying and canning whale meat, and playing around with it and, when we got back about seven months later to Cambridge, we were asked to stay on and deal with the samples and about that time it was Dunkirk I suppose, at about that time: and then, after a little time Marr volunteered and he joined the Navy, and that's the last I saw of him for some time. Then later on I was sent back on another whaler, just in case some more experimental work was needed with which I could give a hand, but that came to nothing and so I worked along with the crowd then in the whaler, as labourer

Joanna Rae: Could you tell me something about that kind of life?

Gwion Davies: The whaling?

Joanna Rae: Yes.

Gwion Davies: Well, yes. For a start, in the second ship the crew was mostly Norwegian, and the British crew were almost entirely Welshman – so the two languages you heard aboard ship all the time were Welsh and Norwegian, very little English – the Mate was an Englishman and otherwise there was very little English spoken and I got back all the Welsh I'd forgotten – almost forgotten it you see, living in England for so long, and I learnt a lot more too, besides. Oh, it was a great crowd to be along with and...

Joanna Rae: Not a sailing ship?

Gwion Davies: No, no, no! She was a whaling factory – oh no, a big factory ship – there was a fleet of catchers; these things with a slipway up the stern – oh no, there was a big crowd; she was a big ship, about twenty, thirty thousand tons or something like that. And, I could say a lot about the life aboard, but perhaps there isn't time for it now, about the singing that used to go on while we were cleaning the tanks, and all that sort of thing. It was great singing – never forget it – there we are.

Now, you see, after the whaling trip I just went on to join other ships, deep sea, other merchant ships, because we were automatically then in the Merchant Navy; so we had to stay there: in fact they had to send fellows from the [Royal] Navy to man our ships at times, because of the shortage. And so I went and did a couple of trips to India and the United States, and then I went to the coast, to a coaster called the *Doggen Rose* and this was 1943. And then for some reason or another, I began to think what I would do after the war if I came through it, and I fancied joining one of these Discovery ships as AB, you see. So, by that time I was AB – I'd done my time – I wondered what's happened to Marr, if he's still alive; and he'd know, you see. So I wrote off a letter to Marr; I don't know what address – Discovery Committee, I suppose, and I was in Liverpool and forgot all about it – asking him what he thought would be happening after the war, you see, in that line of work.

Anyway, when we got down to Cardiff and got the ship ready for the dockers, the Mate called me aft; 'Taff', he said 'There's a telegram for you from London; it's Top Secret' he said, 'And you've got to leave the ship and you've got to sign off the Merchant Navy and go to London.' 'Where's it come from?' I said. 'It's signed by a fellow called Marr.' 'Oh, Crikey!' I said 'Well, aye, that's OK for me', I said. So,

anyway, I told him, 'I don't want to leave the ship' I said, 'I'm quite happy here, and there's a good crowd' you see. Anyway, I said, 'Orders is orders, so I'll have to go.'

So, there we are – off I went to London – and when I got there I went to the Colonial Office and Marr was there and he told me why he was wanting an extra hand to join an expedition and he asked me if I was willing to go. I said, 'It's OK with me.' I said, 'Thank you very much', because I had a very great regard for Marr, you see, having served with him in the whaler; so that's how I came to join the expedition.

Joanna Rae: And what did you do after the expedition?

Gwion Davies: Well, after we came back in 1946, after a few months ashore, I went back to sea then, in a coaster. I didn't know anything else to do; it was the only work I knew. Actually, I found the work wasn't hard enough; it was too easy a job really, it was not demanding enough after the expedition, you see. So I went to Sweden then, to work on a farm; I was there for a year, and met the members of the Nordenskjöld's expedition, and Gunnar Andersson; I can't remember the names now, but there were two or three of them and I showed them photographs which had been taken of the relics that were found in their old hut in Hope Bay. And they were thrilled to bits and they invited me out very kindly to a dinner and three or four of them who were still surviving, and did me proud, really. I was very grateful to them. Gunnar Andersson gave me copies of his book 'Mannen kring Sydpolen' – 'Men around the South Pole' in Swedish, which described that expedition. He thought perhaps I might be able to translate it, because I knew Swedish and used to do some translation work but I'm afraid it never came to anything.

So, after coming back from Sweden, I went and did a course in Agricultural Science in Bangor, because I had a year owing to me, as it were, from my University course and after doing agriculture, I ended up in Fisheries! [*Laughter*] You couldn't get anything more different, could you? Anyway, that was in Aberdeen and there was a good deal of sea time there on the herring boats, and after that I was transferred to the Fisheries Experimental Station in Conway where I spent the last twenty years or so of my life working on mussel-farming problems because, being in the Antarctic really, it made me very concerned about food supplies – you were always hungry when you were out sledging – made you realise that there must be a lot of people in the world [who] were always hungry, and they never could come back and have a good feed up in the base hut, like we could, at the end of it.

I had seen, of course, terrible hunger in India and it made me think a lot about the need for food and how on earth the world was going to keep itself supplied with food. Well, mussels may seem a funny thing to work on with this in mind but actually they are potentially the most productive fish you could farm in the sea. I mean they're comparable in production with the five million catches of anchovetta that used to be made off the Peruvian coast, or even the fifty million tons of krill that they are likely to be able to harvest – that's the kind of thing. Now, this is something, talking about krill (I don't know if I'm going off at a tangent or not) but I'd like to mention this – while we were in Port Lockroy I was working with Marr a lot, doing the stores; I remember him saying one day to me, he said, 'What they should do, instead of catching whales, they should catch the krill they feed on instead, there's a lot more of it, and turn that into food.' And I thought that sounds a good idea; and during my agricultural course in Bangor I got some krill from Marr, from the Discovery collection, and made a biochemical analysis of them – protein, fat, carbohydrate and all that sort of thing –and they turned out to be very nutritious. So, I thought I'd

follow this up and get some fresh specimens to work on 'em. I was on the point of negotiating a trip on a whaler to do this, but for one reason or another it fell through completely, so that never came to anything.

Anyway, the point is that nowadays and sometime afterwards, krill-catching is all the rage, by the Japanese and Russians and other people. And I often think of what Marr said. He was very far seeing, and he'd got something, really.

Joanna Rae: Yes, indeed.

Gwion Davies: It's only a pity he couldn't follow it up. In fact I often think that if this country should ever go in for it, they ought to call the ship the *James Marr*. It would be very fitting, after all the work he did on krill.

Joanna Rae: Could you tell me, in fact, about Marr's duties when he was organising the Operation Tabarin expedition, as far as you knew them?

Gwion Davies: His duties?

Joanna Rae: During the three months before you actually left.

Gwion Davies: All I know is that he was in Colombo, in the Navy, and he got some telegram or a message from the government to come back and organise an Antarctic expedition for that year. I think that the reasons for this have been given by Sir Vivian Fuchs in his book 'Of Ice and Men.' There were political reasons; anyway Churchill saw that this was a very urgent thing that had to be mounted there and then, and this wasn't in the book – in the summer, 1943. So, he got back to this country and he had three months to gather a crowd of chaps together, and all the gear they needed, and all that sort of thing, ready for the autumn

Well, actually what happened was this, (perhaps I shouldn't repeat what may have been repeated in Fuchs' book.) You know that the original idea was to send just a party of soldiers down there, a sergeant and corporals, just to sit somewhere in the Antarctic to occupy the place and that was that. Well, when the Discovery Committee was called into this, they insisted that some decent scientific work should be done, to make the most of the chance, you see. This is what Marr tried to do and to cut the long story short he managed to find the right sort of scientists and the scientific gear and everything, apart from the hut and the supplies, down to the last sail-needle practically, almost single-handed. It's only looking back on it I realise what a fantastic job he did; it would have driven me round the bend: I could never have done it, anyway. You know, it's terrific, the job he did.

Joanna Rae: Yes...

Gwion Davies: Mind you, he had some experience in fitting-out an expedition when he was a youngster, when he went north to the Arctic in the brigantine *The Lady of Avonal*. Can't remember the name of the expedition now, but his job was to fit out the expedition, so he did know something about it.

Joanna Rae: That must have been very helpful, in fact...

Gwion Davies: Well, I'm sure it was. It was amazing – we never wanted for anything down there, we had everything we needed. Not only was it such a job to pick it up in such a short time, it was wartime: you couldn't get hold of stuff and, despite that, he got the things together and...

Joanna Rae: Were there members of the expedition available to help?

Gwion Davies: Well no, they were all over the shop. Chippy Ashton – I don't know where he was at the time: actually a lot of this is probably given in our little Newsletter we had, down at the bases – 'The Hope Bay Howler' and 'The Port Lockroy Prattler', which Lamb and others used to bring out, and one of the things was a series on 'How I came to be in the Antarctic', or something like that, you see. But anyway, Chippy was in the Merchant Service, and Jock [Matheson] was in the RNR – he was in a Naval vessel, a tanker supplying the fleet, fleet tanker, and I really just don't know how he got hold of all the people together...

Joanna Rae: So you only actually came together at the last minute, as it were...

Gwion Davies: Well, I was very much a Johnny-come lately: I just joined at the last minute; he was just short of a handyman, someone to deal with the stores, so I never really found out in great detail how the others came to be – how he got hold of the others. I mean there were people – there was a Canadian, there was Andy Taylor, Captain Taylor from the Royal Canadian Engineers and there was Norman Layther from [the] New Zealand Air Force, and other people from all over the shop, so I think he did a miraculous job of work ...

Joanna Rae: In such a short time as well...

Gwion Davies: In such a short time, yes, exactly...

Joanna Rae: He had to find a ship as well...

Gwion Davies: Yeah! And it had to be kept Top Secret – this was the main thing: nobody was to know, because it was political you see, in wartime. And then he got the ship, the *Veslekari* – she was a sealer and he went to Iceland to fetch her: actually he'd been in Iceland, based in Iceland for the Navy, during the early part of the war, so perhaps he saw her there. She was loaded up; she was brought down to this country: she was kind of a ketch-rigged vessel – I don't think she had any square yards to the mainmast. I think she was ketch rigged and with an auxiliary steam engine, about 100-foot long I believe, not unlike the *Quest*, and she was brought down and loaded up and when we set off from the Royal Albert Dock there was nobody to wave us off, as it were, not like the usual sort of expeditions: we just sort of crept out, in dead secrecy, and Marr was saying – he turned round to Fram – I think he said, 'Never in the history of Polar Exploration has an expedition left with such little fuss.' Anyway, there was more fuss than we realised because, what with the big load in her, she must have been an old ship, she began to make water and the engine was breaking down all the time, you see – she had engine trouble and we had to put in to one port after another down the Channel coast. Now I think most people had heard about the *Veslekari*, or HMS *Bransfield* as she was known at the time: she was flying the White

Ensign. Anyway, she was making so much water and by the time we got to Falmouth it was decided to abandon her, because I mean she'd got a long trip to make down the South Atlantic and the roaring forties. The idea was, you see, that we would take her down to an Antarctic base and let her freeze in and use her as a kind of a floating or frozen-in base, like the *Fram*, to take our time about setting-up a hut and getting our gear ashore – but that wasn't to be.

Anyway, when we got to Falmouth, we then had to tranship all the gear to a troopship – she was the *Highland Monarch*, she was in Avonmouth. We had a train journey; the whole party went by special train from Falmouth to Avonmouth. Ha! Ha! You'd better ask Doc and Fram about that, because it was quite a pantomime, this train journey, it took about – I don't know – 24 hours as far as I remember, across Devon and we were stuck in sidings and so on, and brewing-up tea in a signal-box and...

Joanna Rae: And while you were waiting to get to...

Gwion Davies: Well, we were being shunted around, so that was quite a story in itself. I can't remember the details now, but I think Fram and Doc Back can tell you more about that. It was quite a comical thing, really...

Joanna Rae: [Laughter} Quite a pantomime...

Gwion Davies: Anyway, when we got to Falmouth we went on board the *Highland Monarch* – she was taking troops out to Gibraltar and taking some of the Gibraltar dockers back there, too. And, when we got to Gibraltar – I can't quite remember the details – but I think the Gibraltar fellows were sent with us down to the Falklands to relieve the garrison there.¹ And so we went down to Montevideo then, and we transhipped there to the *Fitzroy*.

You know, it's a funny thing, my mind's a bit woolly about such things, you know, but I think that's what we did...

Joanna Rae: Yes... You spent your first year at Base 'A', Port Lockroy. What were your initial duties whilst the base was being established?

Gwion Davies: You mean, while we were landing the stores? Oh well, yes – working along with the rest of the crowd, you see...

Joanna Rae: Well, everybody just mucked in?

Gwion Davies: ...humping gear ashore, and the Falkland Islanders, the crew of the *Fitzroy*, they were marvellous chaps, they were used to this sort of thing. They used to lash two barges together, make a kind of raft, which they towed ashore with a motor-boat, because they were used to doing this with loaded wool in out-of-the-way places in the Falklands, so they knew the work well, and they were most efficient. And, they did a marvellous job there, the crew off the *Fitzroy*. Anyway, they dumped us and our gear ashore – coal for two years, food for two years and everything from a kitchen stove to a sail needle, as it were, including the hut and everything like that – all the timbers and it was just a matter of shifting them up onto the top of Goudier

¹ Some Allied troops relieved by the return of the dockers were included in the Falklands contingent.

Islet while we were building the hut. Chippy was in charge of that, of course, and once the stuff was ashore it was covered with a tarpaulin as best we could and stored away, and then we turned to getting on with the hut to get a roof over our heads.

Joanna Rae: And so he directed operations, did he? And you all...

Gwion Davies: Well Marr of course, he was in charge. And he was the boss you see. We called him the Boss, and he organised all that sort of thing, but Chippy, he was the one, really, who was in charge of actually putting up the hut because he knew most about the job, he was a specialist in that line, of course.

Joanna Rae: What were your responsibilities once everything settled down?

Gwion Davies: Oh, well, once we got settled down, my main responsibilities was with the gear, really, looking after that and seeing that was OK. I was signed on, actually, as Stores Officer but it sounds a bit pompous [*Laughter*] really, in that kind of set-up. I was really a handyman and the others were specialists in their own field, in weather and geology and botanists, and so on, so it was only natural for me to be a handyman, because having been to sea, it came naturally, you see – so there we are.

Joanna Rae: What did that involve? That set quite a number of problems.

Gwion Davies: Well yes, I worked a lot with Marr. Marr was very conscious of the need to look after our stores properly. I remember one of the things we spent a lot of time doing early on, was scratching on the tins of food and everything else, labelling them according to some code, because he foresaw that the paper labels could easily drop off, you see, with damp in the summer and rust, and so on, and we wouldn't know what was inside. That was one of the things we had to do and, while I was working with him day after day, scratching these numbers and letters on these tins, etching them on, he used to talk a lot about various things and I got to know him quite well.

But apart from that I suppose my other duties were, well, anything to do with making gear for sledging and stuff like that, palm and needle work or rope work and that sort of thing – sailorising work, as you might say. And, I was the coal-man as well and the first year when we were in Port Lockroy, we got the coal in a big heap. They were in bags of about one and three-quarter hundredweight, about fourteen stone I suppose, and we put these in a big pile and then, of course, as soon as the stuff was ashore it was all hands to building the hut. Well, while we were building the hut it came on to snow. I know you'd expect it – that didn't matter. The coal didn't take hurt from that, but what happened, the whole of the coal heap, it got frozen in a solid mass so, whenever we wanted coal after that, you had to mine it with a crowbar. And it was quite a job getting every sack out, you see: so that was one of my little jobs.

Joanna Rae: You had to do that, did you?

Gwion Davies: The expedition miner, yes. [*Laughter*] Anyway, I was pleased to do that, 'cause it gave me a job, didn't it? Everybody had his own job, you see.

Joanna Rae: How were the stores kept? Did you keep them by content or...

Gwion Davies: Well, Tom Berry, he was Chief Steward and he knew all about that sort of thing and he used to say what he wanted and he used to ask me to go and get a case of this or a case of that. I think probably Marr used to do the bookkeeping, or Tom Berry may have done it, I can't remember. All I did was fetch what he wanted and bring it into the hut, you see.

Joanna Rae: And was that all kept in the Nissen hut then, the stores?

Gwion Davies: The stores, yes, and the used Nissen huts were ex-Army huts from the Falklands and they were taken down to be able to stow them aboard ship, you see. Well, when we put them up again, of course they were a bit worse for wear and I remember one time we put up the frame and they [*sic*]² got blown flat and that sheared a lot of bolts, and that didn't help. So, they were a bit ropey you see, when they were put up.³ Anyway, we had a hell of a stores, alright, against the worst of the weather, and I noticed after we had got the stores inside them it filled up with snow – the doors quite shut, the windows themselves, they were whole and sound – I couldn't make out where it was coming from. Big, big drifts, you see, buried a lot of cases; big as a double sofa, some of them – I couldn't make out where it was coming from. And then, during a blizzard, I went in there to see if I could see where the snow was coming in. And, what I could see was very very fine, dusty powdery snow drifting in from goodness knows where and when I looked to see where it was coming from, they were coming in from little old nail-holes in the corrugated iron – and there were scores of these, of course. And so, it seemed I didn't know how to stop the thing from getting filled up, you see.

So, I think I tried plugging it with paper and bits of cloth and stuff, but it was no good because the holes were too small – you could hardly see them. And then I think I might have – if I remember – making up a bit of flour paste in the galley and taking that out to paste them over, to see if that would stop them but I think the paste froze solid before you could use it, you see. So anyway, I didn't carry on with that 'cause it didn't work, for some reason. So I was looking at these holes, I sort of – out of disgust or desperation – I spat on 'em and of course that froze them up, didn't it? And I thought, it worked, you know? It stopped the holes! I went round then, spitting at all these scores of little holes, wherever I could find one. And, you know, it stuck and it stopped the problem – and that's how we kept the snow out!

Joanna Rae: A lot less effort than the other methods...

Gwion Davies: Well I did, and the other methods didn't work, you see, and spitting on them – of course it froze immediately – anyway, it worked very well. [*Laughter*] And anyway, I cleared the drifts out then, and we had no more trouble. Mind – we left in the next Spring and I never heard whether all that melted off and it had to be done over again – I couldn't say. Following year, aye, for the next fellow that came. Aye, so that's a tip for anybody who has that trouble again.

Joanna Rae: Could you describe a typical day's routine?

² The 7 individual half-hoop frames from the first hut.

³ This may explain why, of the two Nissen huts offloaded at Port Lockroy, only one was erected. Parts of steelwork from the second hut remained lying on site until 1996.

Gwion Davies: Oh! It was very varied. I think we used to turn out about seven or something like that in the morning; I can't remember now for sure. And, we used to have tea-oh in the middle of the morning, and then we had our dinner about twelve – a dinner-hour – and then we used to turn-to again about one o'clock and carry on working 'till about five or six then we had to have a good feed then, a good meal. But, talking about tea, being on the coast we had to get glacier ice for our water and this was 'cause there were a lot of glaciers calving all the time and it was no problem to find that. But, during the winter, we couldn't tell sometimes which was glacier ice and what was sea-ice and sometimes somebody'd make a mistake, and when it came to tea-oh, we'd all be sitting down smiling with hot tea in front of us. All of a sudden everybody's face would go very serious and sour [*Laughter*] because they'd got sea-ice, you see. [*Laughter*] Nobody likes salty tea very much...

Joanna Rae: No, I bet...

Gwion Davies: No... So that fellow's name was mud for the rest of the day. [*Laughter*] Aye... Well anyway, the routine. Really, you'd think, being down there, you'd be wondering what to do with yourself. But actually, there was more work than you could manage, almost. You're working after supper: at night you still carry on, with working on getting ready for expeditions, for sledging trips and so on. Really, you're working from the time you turned out to the time you turned in.

And I remember when we left the expedition, when we were aboard the *Fitzroy* and the *Ajax*, going home in 1946, feeling very much at a loose end, and being idle practically for the first time in two years. And it felt very odd...

Joanna Rae: Yeah, I'm sure...

Gwion Davies: Yes indeed.

Joanna Rae: What kind of things did you have to do to prepare for a sledge trip; what was involved?

Gwion Davies: Well, getting the sledges rigged up, getting them put together and one of my jobs, particularly, was making up the rations. Chippy made some sledge boxes and we put the daily rations in these. Well, it meant weighing-out, 'cause Marr and Doc Back, they worked out the daily rations; what each man should have, you see, for health and to do the work, and of course they referred to literature – Scott's experience and so on. We had about a pound and three-quarters of food per man per day. This was pemmican and biscuit, pea-flour, dried milk, [a] bit of sugar, bit of tea, cocoa, chocolate in two-ounce bars, butter and things like that, you see. Anyway, it meant weighing-out daily 'whacks'; 'man-whacks' for perhaps a month or two – whatever it was, the length of the trip you were planning, and putting them in little linen bags to save the weight of the jars and the tins, you see, and also so that we could get at them. Because I mean, you lost a tin opener and you'd be stuck, wouldn't you? And then, the paraffin and all that. Looking back at it now, we had linen bags you see. Well there's nothing in that, but somebody had to foresee that? Marr, or whatever, you see? Anyhow, it's marvellous – we lacked for nothing – it was little details like that, you see

Anyway, this is one of the things, making up the rations and getting the paraffin ready for the trip – that was for when we were man-hauling: and of course with the

dogs, you had to get the dog-rations as well. They had two pounds of pemmican a day and I was straightaway a bit jealous of that, because they had two pounds and we had one-and-three-quarters. But I thought they are working a lot harder than we are – they deserve it. You know, you had to be strict with yourself, not to pinch some of their pemmican and start gnawing that. It was in little briquettes; fair play, you know, pinching other's food like that. [*Laughter*] I know I did take a nibble at a cake once. It was jolly good; I could have eaten the whole lot. [*Laughter*] But anyway, they deserved it more than I did. Oh, they were marvellous fellows, those dogs, marvellous

Joanna Rae: I bet you really appreciated them, after a year without...

Gwion Davies: Well, after man-hauling you did. You respected them because you knew what it was that they had to pull. I don't want to jump ahead too much – it's not like having pet dogs in this country – the point is, it's rather like having a sheepdog. You respect a working dog because you're part of a team: in fact, when the going was hard, we sometimes used to take a trace and pull along with the dogs, you see? And, they had got great guts and sometimes you'd be in a jam, like when we used to be falling through the ice when the snow melted on the top of the sea-ice one time and they were falling through into the water. If the dogs hadn't kept going we would have been in a right mess, you see. And they kept going, they were very gutsy and we were really dependant on them for our lives I suppose, we had tremendous respect. Anyway, I'm going off at a tangent so I don't want to...

Joanna Rae: I'd like to talk to you about that later. [*Crosstalk*] I understand you also had to do something for the sledge runners – you had to make something for them.

Gwion Davies: The sledge runners. Well, all I remember doing was burning Stockholm tar into them, as we did on our skis, to make them run better.

Joanna Rae: Ah, I see...

Gwion Davies: Yes, you smear them with Stockholm tar and you melt it in with a blowlamp. That's all I remember doing with them...

Joanna Rae: Oh, with the skis you had to make sort of little...

Gwion Davies: Oh yes, well of course with the skis we did that as well. None of us could ski, incidentally, when we got down there and you know, a crowd of sailors and amateurs were there, and most of us had never seen a ski; I don't think I ever had. So we had to teach each other how to ski and we had great fun doing that when we used to knock off on Sunday afternoons: our free time you see. The first thing you had to learn was how to stop; all you had to do was sit down... [*Laughter*] Amateurish, you know, laughable, really.

Joanna Rae: Was there anybody that was good on skis beforehand?

Gwion Davies: Well, Lamb – he'd been on skis, I think, in Finland but he was the only man who'd ever had his feet in them, as far as I know. Taylor – he'd worked

with snowshoes in the Canadian Arctic but he'd never actually been on skis, but we got quite good at it in the end.

This was skiing off on the glacier, you see, on Sunday afternoon and we'd get practice. But this kind of thing, really, was pleasure skiing I'm talking about: now the real skiing that mattered was when we were man-hauling, or actually when we had the dogs, skiing with the sledges. But when we were man-hauling we needed to have skins on the skis, to be able to get a grip on the snow. So, what we did when we got a Weddell seal was to cut long strips of the skin off the seal and stitch it round the skis. You had to make sure that when you did this, the fur was all running fore-and-aft, absolutely dead straight right down the length of the ski, otherwise you would go crooked. I remember very well cutting a length of strip – part of it went under the arm, under the flipper of the seal, you see, and there's a little bit of a twiddle there in the fur and I put it on the ski; thought it didn't matter but by golly, I could hardly keep the ski in a straight course you know; it was really troublesome.

So it was important to keep them straight, but once you got them on properly ooh! you could go up a 45° slope in them – it was marvellous and you could generally pull anything. What amazed me was how strong the skin was. You'd put them on the tips of the skis, stitched the ends together, made little pockets over the tips of the skis and then this thing was lying like a great big sort of sausage underneath, And so what you did, with a palm and needle, you stitched the edges over the top of the ski and pulled really hard, criss-cross along the length and if you put the needle in half an inch from the edge, you can pull as hard as you like, it'd never tear and it was marvellous. And in time of course, the stuff would harden then and they'd last for ages, the lines. But I suppose they have artificial skins now...

Joanna Rae: Yes, I'm afraid I don't know...

Gwion Davies: The only trouble with the skins was that, really, you couldn't get a very good grip on the side of the ski when you were traversing a slope and they used to wear them out rather a lot too; the edge of the ski was rather rounded...

...

Joanna Rae: No, they didn't have that sharp edge to help you...

Gwion Davies: No, I think they have edges called *pimpierie haffstein* [*sic*] things or whatever it is, on skis for that purpose; that was the only disadvantage with 'em. But anyway we didn't do too much of that gallivanting about, because it was mainly a question of man-hauling.

<END OF DISK ONE>

<START OF DISK TWO>

Joanna Rae: Were your duties at Hope Bay much the same? [*Break in recording*]

Gwion Davies: My duties at Hope Bay? They were the same as those at Port Lockroy. Well, much the same as I said but with the dogs to feed. As far as duties around the base were concerned well, that's a sort of routine job, but others also helped, or did that work, like David James – he had a lot to do with the dogs, and Freddy Marshall brought them down and he taught us the elements of what he'd been told by the Eskimos up in Labrador, where he went to fetch them...

Joanna Rae: So he knew how to drive them, did he?

Gwion Davies: Freddy Marshall? Well, none of us did, really; I don't think he'd had any special experience except from what the Eskimos had told him. We relied a lot on experience from the British Grahamland Expedition: Ryland and Stevenson and company of course, and their experience; and for that reason we used the 'fan' system of harnessing them, rather than having them between parallel traces. For various things like that we relied a lot upon the BGLE experience, of course – all the time [for] many things, for rations and so on.

Joanna Rae: You had the reports or something?

Gwion Davies: Oh yes! Well personally I didn't know much about it, but the Boss and others were looking a lot at what they wrote about that sort of thing. So, I would say the duties were much the same really as general handyman; of course the sledging trips were a bit more frequent and longer but with the dogs, of course, you really did appreciate what the dogs were doing, having been man-hauling.

Joanna Rae: What happened when a few people went off sledging – what did the people left behind do? [*Crosstalk*]

Gwion Davies: ...well, there was the usual routine, keeping the hut going and then there was [*sic*] the weather observations, the wireless routine... It's a funny thing; but although we were so busy, I can't remember all that clearly.

Joanna Rae: Hm; a long time ago.

Gwion Davies: Well it is. You know, there are great blanks in the mind now, you see.

Joanna Rae: Oh! Would you describe the establishment of the Hope Bay base, 'cause it was quite a dramatic affair.

Gwion Davies: Well yes. I think this has been well described by David James in 'In That Frozen Land' and by Sir Vivian in that book 'Of Ice and Men.' I mean, I could repeat that, but I think they'd better tell that story. All I remember is that we

were called out. Well, we were landed, you see: we had this Newfoundland sealer the *Eagle* that brought stores for the next year for the expedition. She was anchored in Hope Bay and we'd landed most of the stuff from her, and a gale blew up and an iceberg bore down upon her and carried away her bowsprit and stove in her bows. She was blown out to sea and we never thought we'd see her again or hear of her again, but luckily they made the Falklands. I remember being 'all hands on deck', being called out in the middle of that gale, and running down to the shore with coils of rope and whatever else was necessary.

Joanna Rae: Because they, at one point, were thinking of beaching her...

Gwion Davies: Beaching her, that's right. But Captain Sheppard, he decided to run for the Falklands. We lost some of the gear: not lost it, but they had to take away some of the gear which they failed to land, but nevertheless we had enough to get on with. He was a highly fine man, a very brave man...

Joanna Rae: Captain Sheppard?

Gwion Davies: Yes; he smashed himself up, during that trip; you know, got swung about by the sea. He was a fine chap... Did that answer your question?

Joanna Rae: Yes. It was the fact that the ship had to leave, left you quite a lot of work, didn't it, in transferring stores?

Gwion Davies: Oh yes, I suppose it did! I'd forgotten about that. Yes, we had to drag a lot of it ashore, across a spit of land to the hut, on sledges and so on.

Joanna Rae: That gave you a bit of practice with the dogs, I suppose.

Gwion Davies: Well it did, yes. I think David James and Freddy Marshall were more in charge of the dogs at that time; I think they certainly did a lot of that work. But really, I think the dogs taught us, for they'd been trained by the Eskimos, you see, and so long as they knew the orders, 'Irrr' for left and 'Yook' [*sic*] for right and 'Aah' for stop, and 'Now boys, Huit now', that was when we wanted them to get up, you know, to start off after breaking the sledge out. Things like that – and they knew what to do [*Laughter*] so they were our teachers.

Joanna Rae: Did you, was it relatively easy to learn, did you find, or...

Gwion Davies: Hah! Well, I suppose, in a crude sort of way, it went OK. But, I remember we had Eskimo whips and they were things of great long flexible rawhide handles and great long leather whips, they were. And what we used to do, to make the dogs go one way or the other, was to lay the whip on the snow alongside them, so that they'd shear away from it, along with giving them the order to go left or right, and that used to help. But, you had to be jolly careful how you handled that whip because if you weren't very good at it, you'd get the end of it round your neck. And it could give you a black eye, that thong coming along; ten, fifteen, twenty feet long. So, in the end I got wary of this, and I got a broom handle and put the whip on the end of that and held it out at arm's length before I did any of that sort of stunt – well clear of my head! That worked OK.

Joanna Rae: That solved that problem!

Gwion Davies: That solved that problem, yes, and then of course the Eskimos, they could use a whip precisely. What we wanted to do was to be able to give a flick to one or two of the dogs that was hanging back with a slack trace, you see, but you're more likely to cop it yourself than the dog was. [*Laughter*] We were kinder to the dogs than we should have been, for very good reason – we thought more of our own safety [*Laughter*]

Joanna Rae: Were they real characters?

Gwion Davies: Oh! Great Scott yes, oh yes.

Joanna Rae: They were individuals...

Gwion Davies: Oh yes, Aye. Yes, indeed: just extra members of the expedition. I mean; being so few of you down there, of course they were extra people. It's like that old pig we had. I don't know if I mentioned him before...

Joanna Rae: This was at Port Lockroy?

Gwion Davies: Port Lockroy... Do you want me to say anything about the pig?

Joanna Rae: Yes, please do.

Gwion Davies: It just shows, you know, how attached you can get to these things. Well, when we were relieved at the end of the first year the *Scoresby* came down from the Falklands, just to see how we were, and they brought two little pigs with them. And one was for Deception and one was for us, and we were to fatten these up on our scraps and to enjoy a nice feed of pork; that was the idea; so much pork on the hoof. Well, when this little fellow came ashore, that made our little expedition one man extra, didn't it, or a girl actually, 'cause I think it was a little sow.⁴ But, when this little thing was brought ashore, all starkers you know, it was shivering [*unintelligible, followed by laughter*] the first thing to do was to make a hut for her. So I got an old crate and filled it with wood wool and blocked in two-thirds of the entrance and the little pig dived in, and all you could see was her snout sticking out and, you know, it gave you a kind of fellow-feeling for the creature; we were concerned with keeping warm. And you know, she kept that sty as clean as a whistle – never, never fouled it.

It was my job really, to look after the pig and I used to give her scraps – I can't remember what, and put it out in a dish in front of the sty and the old pig would come out – the only thing that would fetch her out. In time the seagulls came to know that this feed was going there and we used to get these great big black-backed gulls and these little Paddy-birds; what do you call them, sheathbills, all crowding round. In fact the gulls would even feed out of our hands at the end, they got that tame. But, as soon as the old pig came along, of course they'd scatter and stand by respectfully until he'd [*sic*] had his feed and then they'd come in and dive in and finish off what was left.

⁴ Subsequently it was possible to confirm that the pig was a female.

So, we'd had this pig for about three or four weeks between the trips, when the ships came down again to take us to Hope Bay, and we used to get very fond of this old pig and used to play 'tip and run' with her, you see. She'd run one way and I'd chase her, then I'd run away and the old pig would chase me...

Joanna Rae: Oh, how lovely! [*Laughter*]

Gwion Davies: One time Chippy'd been painting one of the boats, painting her grey, and then we knocked off for dinner. The next thing, what did we see when we came out from dinner, but an old grey pig coming up. You know, like pigs do, they like to saw their sides against anything like that, and she'd fairly coated herself with grey paint. You know, we had a bit of a job to get that off her, she'd got it all over her... (*Crosstalk*)

Joanna Rae: I suppose, unfortunately, she had been brought down to supplement your diet, had she?

Gwion Davies: Well, that's it, you see. Well, the dogs were coming and we knew there was no place for dogs and a pig, 'cause what happened at Deception was that, we found out later, when the dogs were landed they got at the pig and the pig just disappeared, just scattered all over the beach – just arms and legs and bones and things – terrible. So, we realised that we couldn't keep the pig as a member of the expedition, so we had to kill it. And there's a little quandary in that because I hated to break trust, you see, and so perhaps it was cheating, but the only way I could think of doing it in the best way. I waited 'till the pig was asleep in the sun, snoozing away, and I got a '45 and shot her point-blank right in the head, [*smacks hands*] finished her like that you see: she never knew a thing. But we were broken-hearted, and none of us enjoyed that, no, no...

Joanna Rae: No, no.... [*Crosstalk*]

Gwion Davies: ...but what could you do?

Joanna Rae: That's right, yes. And the people at Stanley only thought they were being helpful.

Gwion Davies: Oh yes! I mean, you think nothing of it. They were unaware; it was all in good faith. I suppose it's a little bit sentimental but you get attached, you see, because we were the only living creatures there within hundreds of miles – we used to get very attached to the birds, you see, and I suppose if a bluebottle had come down there, we would have made friends with that too, you know? [*Laughter*] It was like being in outer space, in a way. Very much that feeling; being on the edge of the living world. Aye, so...

Joanna Rae: Did you in fact find the same individual birds would hang around the base, that you got to know individuals?

Gwion Davies: Well, I don't remember knowing any by name or individually, except there'd be the same type of bird there, day after day, so you guessed probably they were the same ones; I don't know whether we upset the migration routine of the

Paddies and that, because they stuck there all the winter, with the scraps we used to give them to eat. Aye. They were comical things too...

Joanna Rae: If we could talk for a little while about the field trips you went on; the first major one you took part in was the surveying trip on Wiencke Island...

Gwion Davies: That's right.

Joanna Rae: Could you tell me something about that? If we start off generally, you know?

Gwion Davies: Well yes, we got up the glacier, you know, with the help of...

Joanna Rae: You were man-hauling, weren't you?

Gwion Davies. We were man-hauling. There were four of us; there were James Marr and myself had one sledge and the other sledge was pulled by Lamb and Taylor. So we set off and, Doc and Fram, I think, Farrington helped us up the first bit – or Johnny Blyth; I can't remember who came with us – anyway, you know two or three of us helping to get us up the steepest part of the glacier. And so we set out for the other side of Wiencke Island: there's a great big pass between two high mountains – Mount Luigi di Savoia⁵ was one of them, [it] was about 4000 feet high and there was a big mountain (I forget the name⁶) about 3000 or so, and they were like sheer cliffs; they were almost coming down to the glacier and we had to watch out for the ice-falls coming down these, and going through that pass we seemed absolutely minute – like little bugs almost, crawling up the glacier – these mountains were so huge!

Joanna Rae: Yes, towering over you...

Gwion Davies: Yeah; I remember we were harnessed to the sledge; it's only natural of course, and I remember we must have gone too close to one side or other 'cause we heard a bit of a rumble. The next thing we saw was an ice-fall, coming down the cliff. Of course our instinct was to dash off, you see – get clear of it – we were brought up sharp by the sledges. We couldn't get out of them; our fingers were too frozen to let go so, instinctively, I think, we just lay down on the snow, 'head to sea' as it were, as you might in a small boat. Anyway, luckily nothing happened – we got a terrific blast of ice-dust came at us, but nothing big and it just stopped short of us, this avalanche, and so we were very thankful [*Chortles*] so we made out to the middle of the glacier after that and kept well clear, right in the middle.

After that, we got over the other side and we surveyed; we put a month or so on that trip: we were weather-bound for, ooh, about half the time and...

Joanna Rae: What was that like? Did you just feel frustrated, or did you quite enjoy it, really?

Gwion Davies: We just seemed to have wanted food all the time really, having nothing to do. We couldn't do anything about it because we were on our rations. [*Laughter*] But there's one funny thing that happened through lying in the same place

⁵ At 1415m, now known as Luigi Peak.

⁶ At 1100m, was then known as Wall Mountain, now named the Wall Range.

all the time when we were weather-bound. It wasn't desperately cold, perhaps ten, twenty degrees or so below freezing, Fahrenheit; a temperature of about, say, fifteen to twenty Fahrenheit, as freezing is 32. And so it wasn't cold and what happened was that, when we were lying on our sleeping-bags, we made a kind of a hollow in the snow with the warmth of our bodies and, although we had a deer-skin and a canvas groundsheet, of course, and double sleeping-bags, it still, as it were, melted the snow a bit. But the worst of it was, the snow under the waterproof groundsheet, that was OK: the worst of it was the condensation from our bodies also condensed and that gathered in pools underneath the sleeping-bags until they were quite sopping and we had to wring them out and it was a bit uncomfortable. If it had been a bit drier, colder, it would have been all right.

But, after that experience, I experimented when we got back to base with sleeping out in the Nissen hut on a kind of a hammock with the part of the sleeping-bag underneath (like a hammock inside the sleeping-bag) to see if the insulation would be kept [unaffected] through its not being compressed, you see. I think that worked quite well; there was no sign of any damp forming then. But how you'd work that out in a tent – I really didn't think it out, this idea.

Joanna Rae: Might be a bit complicated...

Gwion Davies: Well, yes, it would mean having a kind of camp bed slung on the poles of the tent and I don't really think, looking back, that this was a very common problem anyhow. It was rather a specialised problem and most people would put up with much colder weather where that problem doesn't arise.

Joanna Rae: You did more experiments in effect, didn't you; you had a go in an igloo?

Gwion Davies: Oh Yes! Well, Lamb made an igloo; we had a 'Polar Record', which described how to make an Eskimo igloo, and he made a very fine igloo about, ooh, I don't know, five or six feet high, proper thing and I made various igloos too, but smaller things, half sunk. And I may add we spent a night, at least I spent a night in one of these igloos, with a little candle; it was quite cosy, quite warm; and not a breath of wind, you see. Oh yes, it was very comfortable indeed.

Joanna Rae: How long did it take to build?

Gwion Davies: Oh, it took him quite a while – because he made a proper one – oh aye, it was the best part of a day but the ones I made, I didn't take so long because I used to dig out half the base, you see, and just cover the upper half with snow blocks; it was an idea I had of making emergency igloos if you were stuck without a tent. I remember one time, we were on the glacier – it was a Sunday afternoon and Lamb and I had gone up there to do some skiing; it was in our free time you see, so I thought I would practice making one of these igloos. And, I'd got a shovel with me, and chose a nice smooth level bit of glacier and I started digging out a circle, see, a six-foot diameter of the igloo, and I got one spit down and chucked that out and then I started digging out the next spit. You know, it was hard snow, and you had to punch really hard with the round-nosed shovel.

The next thing I knew, my shovel went in right up to its handle – what was this fool doing, but digging himself through a snow bridge. [*Laughter*] I could see a great

blue-black gaping hole underneath, with a cold breeze coming up it, so you never saw anybody jump out so quick, and Lamb saw a white-faced figure staggering towards him [*Laughter*] The point was, this was winter-time and you can't tell there's crevasses underneath you and in the summer, when the snow had melted a bit, I could see where the crevasse was; you could see a furrow of the snow. So, I thought well, think twice before you start digging igloos in a glacier – at least have a rope tied to a peg, anyway.

Joanna Rae: A bit close!

Gwion Davies: It taught me a lesson

Joanna Rae: Nobody on the expedition actually fell down a crevasse did they?

Gwion Davies: No, fortunately no, no. I've been reading 'Of Ice and Men' – the terrible experiences some of them had. No, when we were setting off, actually, on this Wiencke Island trip all that happened was the sledge capsized, breaking through a snow bridge, but we soon got it out. It was a very narrow crevasse: that was the only problem we had.

On this trip, I'd just like to recall something, which showed something about Marr. We were chaining a distance on Wiencke Island, on the far side to get sights, I suppose, on the distant peaks, 'cause Taylor was the surveyor and Marr and I were chaining and Taylor and Lamb were doing the survey work. It meant pulling out this chain, I don't know how long it is, and then putting in a little marker flag. Marr would come up to it and then I'd go ahead and put in another marker flag in a dead straight line and so on. We'd been doing this a while and, all of a sudden there was no marker flag. I'd forgotten to put one in. Good gracious me! I thought I could perhaps guess where it was.

No, it was not good enough; we had to go back to the very beginning again and do the whole thing again. We were cold and hungry towards the end of it; the whole thing over again and didn't I feel a fool. He was absolutely dead right: he didn't say much, he said we'd got to do it again. It just shows how thorough he was, conscientious.

Joanna Rae: Yeah...

Gwion Davies: He was absolutely right; an unforgivable thing to do on my part...

Joanna Rae: The trouble is, it's so easily done.

Gwion Davies: Oh yes! Absent-minded, you see. And, another time too, we were in the tent and the Primus wasn't working very well, one of these roll-up Primus', so I thought I'd change the nipple, and it [the spanner⁷] was one of these double-jointed things, and when I came to unscrew it, owing to the stiffness of the joints, the nipple must have been too tight, 'cause I sheared it off. Well, that was trouble: we'd got no way of cooking our food. I knew Taylor and Lamb were in the next tent but then, in a gale of wind, you didn't feel like humping over there. Old

⁷ Pers. comm. Gwion Davies 2001.

Marr didn't say anything; he just caught hold of a bit of a nail and he filed it down and he jammed it in this hole and he got that Primus to work; a smoky and feeble kind of a jet but it did cook – very resourceful...

Joanna Rae: Yeah...

Gwion Davies: Very patient....

Joanna Rae: Yes, that's one of the things that really comes over; these immense stores, just dogged patience.

Gwion Davies: Very forbearing.

Joanna Rae: So he made a good leader, then?

Gwion Davies: Oh! Great Scott yes! Great Scott yes; I had a lot to learn from him. Aye, that's just a little thing and there's a thousand and one other ways in which it showed through. Whenever there was a miserable job to do; for instance, say one of the windows blew in, during a blizzard: he was the first man out, tacking up canvas and all that sort of thing with his cold hands, and if ever there was a miserable, horrible job, or a dangerous job he was there in the thick of it. Jock Matheson used to say, 'He was a good man to have aloft with you, taking in sail.' I can well imagine it.

Joanna Rae: Yes, they'd served together, hadn't they?

Gwion Davies: Yes, in the *Discovery*, the old *Discovery*, the barque. You know, he had a great influence on me in that way, because the way he used to drive himself; 'Never lay back' he said, 'Never lay back.' And you felt, really – what would you call it – it wasn't the thing to do, to take things easy – you've got to do a proper job, do it to your utmost, for the rest of your life, really, as far as you could; not lay back and take it easy.

Joanna Rae: You've always got his example...

Gwion Davies: That's right, as an example. Oh aye. You never forget an example like that; aye, indeed.

Joanna Rae: It's very nice to have served with someone like that.

Gwion Davies: Well, it's a great education; yeah, great education.

Joanna Rae: He was a bit of a humourist as well?

Gwion Davies: Humourist? Oh aye, he was. He'd got some funny sayings and chants – I don't know what you'd call them – expressions, I suppose; and he was always coming out with these just like a bird would, you know – a penguin, almost – chanting away. And indeed, we all used to have a quiet jibe, on the side. But he used to do this quite without thinking, and talking to himself as much as anything. When we meet now, we often think of Marr's sayings and how we used to have a good laugh at them. It was typical of him; I don't know where he got them from, I never

heard them when I was at sea. I think he must have picked them up in the course of his scientific work in *Discovery*, as some of them were semi-scientific.

Joanna Rae: Was there in fact anyone on the expedition who was the practical joker; or did you not have someone like that?

Gwion Davies: Well, I wouldn't say practical joker. I remember one turn he used to put on – he'd have us in fits. He was very solemn about it all, but he had a great sense of humour. But normally, he wasn't a smiling sort of person at all; I think he was naturally a bit dour. But, apart from that, I think just the sheer anxieties of what he had to do, and the whole expedition and the strain of getting it up: and things didn't go right you know. The expedition ship had to be abandoned and we couldn't land on the mainland the first year and all that sort of thing – I think it told on him.

Joanna Rae: He probably took it quite personally?

Gwion Davies: I don't know, I couldn't really say about that, but he felt it to be his duty to do this and I think it preyed on his mind a bit, that sort of thing, but he had a lot on his mind and I wish that I'd realised this a bit more at the time, really.

Joanna Rae: Should he have had a deputy as such, or was...

Gwion Davies: Beg pardon?

Joanna Rae: Did he have a deputy, a deputy leader as such?

Gwion Davies: Yes, Taylor. I think he was a deputy and he took charge when Marr had to go back, in Hope Bay when he hurt his back: he was suddenly pitched into the leadership of the Hope Bay landing.

Joanna Rae: But he didn't really have someone to support him while he was there?

Gwion Davies: Well, I suppose that he would have had the older people; I mean, Lamb and Taylor and people like that you know, oh yes.

Joanna Rae: Oh, good...

Gwion Davies: Mind, I knew vary little about this sort of thing because, if they had a quiet word together I wouldn't have been around, I'd have been outside somewhere; I really wouldn't know much about it. Perhaps Doc Back could tell you, or Fram could tell you something about that [*break in recording*] – I was more outside than anywhere else, you see, so I didn't really see a lot of what was going on in the hut. Aye, but Marr was very much an outside man too...

Joanna Rae: Would you like to stop for a little while?

Gwion Davies: Well if you like, yes. I'm sure I've been talking far too much...

Joanna Rae Well, not at all. [*Tape stops then restarts*] If we could discuss your second trip now, around James Ross Island, from Hope Bay. You used dogs on this occasion, of course...

Gwion Davies: Oh yes...

Joanna Rae: Could you tell me how you found that different from man-hauling?

Gwion Davies: Oh, it was great! They did the work, and all we had to do was ski along beside the sledge and just keep them on a straight course. I described earlier how we used to have to help them at times when the going was rough and the sledge was capsized and that sort of thing, but that was nothing compared to what they were doing for us.

Joanna Rae: Was man-hauling very heavy work?

Gwion Davies: Yes, it was quite hard going, really. I don't know what we had – perhaps a hundredweight each to haul, or something like that. I think Scott and his party had a terrible haul job, pulling those sledges right up to the Pole...

Joanna Rae: How did you navigate?

Gwion Davies: Well, most of the time you could really see ahead to some mountain peak, or some landmark or other when we was [*sic*] navigating but I remember one time when we had to cross a ten-mile ice-field or glacier to get from the Bay of a Thousand Icebergs back to the base, and it came on thick, you see, and we couldn't see at all. We had a compass then, and we had the two dog teams and we pointed them up the glacier in the right direction and set off according to the compass bearing. When the sledge went off course, we just threw the whip alongside on one side or the other with our orders, and the dogs would come onto course again and, with the compass waving about, we managed to keep a course. And I was never so surprised to find that at the end of the trip we actually landed where we should have landed. I was astonished because the compass was all over the shop, and it was important to keep on course because of ice-cliffs too, part of the edge, and it really gave me faith in that method of navigation.

Joanna Rae: What were your maps like? Were they detailed, or rather sketchy?

Gwion Davies: Well, they were sketchy – Nordenskjöld had made some sort of a map, hadn't he? And we had some kind of previous charts from the Admiralty, but they were pretty sketchy... I'm not really the best one to ask about that, because people like Taylor and Dave James, they had more to do with that side of it, so you'd better ask them.

Joanna Rae: What do you remember particularly about that second trip, because it was probably your longest?

Gwion Davies: It was the longest. Well, I think one of the things I remember is that eerie feeling of going on to places where no man had ever trodden before since

the earth was made. That was one thing; it was quite eerie, you know. And not only that, but the scenery was very grim; it was very majestic and very grim. It just was a brooding kind of threat behind you all the time, what with that and the weather. It made you feel you were very much out of place, in a place like that.

I remember listening to one of the American astronauts talking either during his trip or after his trip, about looking back on Mother Earth below. What a warm and lovely place it looked from out there. And, I felt this is just what I used to feel out sledging, really; we were miles from anywhere and out of the living world. We felt that where we were was only the edge of a much vaster region, stretching from the Antarctic right to the back of beyond; beyond the further stars, really – it was a hostile world.

That rang a bell, really, what that astronaut said, in a way. And there was another time when we were very much at the mercy of the elements. We used to be keeping a sharp lookout at the sky to see what the weather was going to do, particularly if there were any blizzards blowing up. And, as soon as we saw the mare's-tails coming up from the south or sou'west we used to know that we'd have to find a camping site pretty soon and put the tent up as soon as we could, before the wind hit us. I often used to think of those mare's-tails as sledges of the blizzard and I used to imagine the demon of the wind flogging his dogs across the sky like some terrible fiend until it burst and let out a roar and a shriek, and we'd have to get our heads down.

Joanna Rae: So, you usually found you had a bit of warning...

Gwion Davies: Well, occasionally you did, sometimes, yes. You had to take heed and know what to expect. It was an unearthly kind of place really, and you never forget it, you never forget it: it was beautiful in its grim way. I remember when I came back to this country and saw this country; the fields and the hedges, they looked very piffling, like glorified allotments and you miss this kind of grandeur. I went to Sweden after: it was a bit better there because the land was more open, it was simpler, the scenery; the open farmlands and the vast blocks of wild forests and the great lakes and that was much more akin to the Antarctic scenery, in its way.

But this is something that I used to miss, the grandeur of it – it gets into you, you see. It's like when you look at the night sky and you begin to wonder what's up there; and it takes your mind outside this little earth, doesn't it? You never forget it, and it gives you a different outlook, somehow, on problems of the world's peoples. The world is one, and we used to think 'what a lovely place is this earth, you know. Down in the temperate zones, in the tropics, there's food, there's warmth and rain and things will grow there; it's not a place of death.' And my feeling was then, well, why on earth can't we make the best of it and run the earth like an expedition so that, you know, whack out what there is between all hands, as it were. I didn't see the sense in all this terrible quarrelling that's going on at all. A trip in Hope Bay would have done the United Nations a lot of good...

Joanna Rae: You've certainly got something there! Could you tell me something about the sledging routines? Did you work having an inside man and an outside man, when you broke camp or made camp?

Gwion Davies: Oh yes. We used to have our turn, turn and turnabout, oh yes.

Joanna Rae: What did each person have to do?

Gwion Davies: Well, say there were two of you. Once you got the tent up – no, just a minute now – first of all we'd stop where we were going to camp. And then next thing we'd stretch out the dog lines, the wire rope with chains strung along it for the dogs and we made jolly sure to stretch them out well apart too, so the dogs wouldn't get at each other; and then, having tethered the dogs, we'd feed them then. I can't remember the exact order, but that was one of the things we had to do pretty promptly; see to them as soon as we could, and then we'd put up the tent together. I think probably that was one of the first things, and then we'd tether the dogs after – I can't remember – and while one man was getting snow in and getting the Primus going the other man would be perhaps feeding the dogs and getting the gear and sleeping-bags off the sledge, and doing what was necessary that way. I'm sorry, I can't remember the exact details of the routine, you see...

Joanna Rae: It doesn't matter...

Gwion Davies: ...but that was the sort of thing. Anyway, by the time the outside man had finished, he'd hope there was something brewing inside the tent; a cup of tea or something of the sort, anyway, to start us off. 'Cause you just had your whack, and after you'd had your one-and-three-quarter pound, that was it, but by golly you did enjoy that too. They talk about pemmican; some people talk about pemmican with a bit of a sneer, but we couldn't get enough of it. It was marvellous! It was great, you know if you're hungry.

Joanna Rae: Did you find it was sustaining enough?

Gwion Davies: Yes, it was half fat and half OXO, beef flavour or something, but anyway it was great stuff. We were better off on the sea ice, because now and again we'd come across a seal and we'd kill that and cut it up for the dogs and ourselves. The dogs would get fourteen parts for the fourteen dogs and we kept the head; and then we got our usual stew of pemmican and water and a bit of pea flour in it and then what we'd do, we'd break open the head, the skull, and get the brains out and stew them too, or else we'd get some of the meat and chop it up in little bits and stew them for about twenty minutes. Oh, you never had such a feed in your life. You see, it'd fill us up then. But the trouble with the rations were – I mean, there were enough; there was thousands of calories in it I suppose – but used to go through you like a dose of salts. I don't know what the matter was with them; it wasn't fibre, or too much fat, or what it was – that used to cause a bit of a problem...

Joanna Rae: ...I bet it did!

Gwion Davies: ...but you never used to feel full, but we were never starving, never starving. Not on those rations, as long as the rations lasted. You were always hungry and sometimes, you know, when you come across seal meat, well that was the great thing if you remember, great feeds we used to have. I think I mentioned somewhere else how Vic Russell and I came across a penguin rookery once, right in the middle of nowhere. Right in the middle of the sea-ice there was a little outcrop of rock and we hadn't come across them in the nesting season, and there were plenty of eggs, so we gathered about three dozen eggs and, for that night's supper and the next

morning's breakfast we ate eighteen eggs each; and the size of goose's eggs, weren't they?

Joanna Rae: Good grief!

Gwion Davies: You never had such a feed in your life!

Joanna Rae: Do they taste very like a hen's egg?

Gwion Davies: Well, I suppose they were; we were more used to dried eggs, weren't we... [*Laughter*]... at that time. Oh yes, they were marvellous things. And, what we used to do at that time was to break half a dozen into a mug and stir it up with a bit of powdered milk and a bit of sugar, you see, and then put boiling water on that and then for a treat, and this was a special emergency, we used to put a teaspoon-full of brandy in, emergency brandy. Aye, you never had such a feed in your life. And, of course, if you'd had a mug of that well, you know, you wouldn't want anything else; and that's how we managed to put down so many of them. And then we had scrambled eggs you see, great feeds. It sounds greedy, talking like this about food but you're that hungry you thought of little else... [*Switch noise*]

Joanna Rae: Were there any particular high points to life on base, such as Midwinter's Day?

Gwion Davies: Oh yes – Midwinter's Day and of course the time when we had the ship coming in with mail at the end of the year – that's when the Post Office got going. I think – oh, Midwinter's Day we just celebrated it, to celebrate... [*Recording stops*]

<ENDS>

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