

JIM RENNIE

Edited transcript of interview with Jim Rennie conducted by Chris Eldon Lee at BAS HQ Cambridge on the 4th of July, 2009. BAS archives AD6/24/1/41. Transcribed by Allan Wearden on the 12th of May, 2017.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Jim Rennie interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at BAS HQ Cambridge on the 4th of July 2009. Jim Rennie.

Rennie: Jim Rennie. I was born on the 23rd of September, 1930, in Horsforth near Leeds. My father and mother both from the Glasgow area so I consider myself to be a Scot through and through, even though I was born and brought up in Yorkshire!

[0:00:27] Lee: So you are a Scotsman who could play cricket for Yorkshire!?

Rennie: Well I was qualified to play for Yorkshire yes. Yes I could have played for Yorkshire, in fact one of my closest school friends was Brian Close who became quite a character, well still is a character, yes!

[0:00:44] Lee: I used to watch him when he played for Somerset!

Rennie: Oh really? Yes, yes right quite, yes, yes!

[0:00:48] Lee: Let's begin by asking you what you were doing before the Antarctic came into your life.

Rennie: Well just immediately prior to getting on FIDS, I was working at the Ordnance Survey. In my youth, my studies suffered because any piece of rock that I saw I wanted to climb it, any mountain I saw I wanted to climb it! It was the be all and end all for me. I have been smitten by likes of Shipton and Mallory, Frank Smythe, Bill Tillman and all the well known climbers of the pre-war era. And when I was in the army I came across a lad who worked with the Ordnance Survey, who said 'You want to get on the Ordnance Survey, because they have guys who spend all day running up and down mountains'! So I thought this was great idea. Anyway I ended up for quite a time in Chessington sitting behind a desk winding a manual calculator, doing calculations for traverses and triangulation, then I was posted to Glasgow, or near Glasgow, to a place called Coatbridge. And this meant that every weekend that I could take off to the Highlands, nearly always on my own, but I climbed an awful lot of mountains in a few months there in the spring of 1953! Then later on I was transferred to Ayrshire and that gave me the opportunity to go across the Isle of Arran, and I did an awful lot of climbing on the Isle of Arran as well and while we were there, that's when the advert appeared I think it was in the *Glasgow Herald* about the 22nd of November '54. And two surveyors from Troon, we were based in Troon went down to London and I was the one that was chosen.

[0:02:42] Lee: The other chap wasn't?

Rennie: No, no he ended up emigrating to Canada I believe.

[0:02:45] Lee: Any idea why they chose you?

Rennie: No idea, no, I was a good bit younger and I had a bit of a Scouting background and the climbing as well I think, the climbing and the surveying did it, it was what they were looking for I think! But it was a real rush job because I didn't hear until Christmas Eve 1954 that I had been selected, and had to be ready to go down to London early January which I did, I think was about the 10th of January. Anyway I went down, but there were delays before the *Norsel*, which was a Norwegian sealing vessel, was ready to sail, very small I forget how many tons, well under a thousand anyway! And piled high with gear for two new base huts and I remember going down the Thames and the lad in the bunk below said 'I hope it doesn't get much rougher than this'! And so about four days later we were just wallowing with the engine off in the Bay of Biscay, and he didn't surface until we were well off the coast of Africa! Well I got up a little bit before him but it was a pretty rough two days!

[0:03:58] Lee: That was a storm that everyone was under and in their bunk wasn't it?

Rennie: Well, I don't know, I didn't surface, I had a little jar of Joe Lyon's boiled sweets and lived on those for about a week, just kept me going! I wasn't being sick, I just didn't feel happy on my feet!

[0:04:20] Lee: Did you have doubts at this point?

Rennie: No, not at all, no, no! I was going somewhere I'd always dreamed of going. I was being paid for it, everything was found, it was perfect, perfect for me, perfect!

[0:04:34] Lee: Where are the roots of this dream, why did you want to go to the Antarctic?

Rennie: Well I'd read Scott's books, Shackleton's books. My father had been, he was born in 1900, so Scott was obviously a boyhood hero of his, so funnily enough during the war my father met a guy on troopship sailing to South Africa wearing a very odd medal, and it turned out to be Hooper who was one of Scott's party, and had done some of the backup depot laying for Scott's Pole Expedition, for expedition to the Pole! And not alone, again through Scouting I'd been shortlisted for public school expedition to Newfoundland and that was being led by Murray Levick, Surgeon Commander Murray Levick, who was in fact was part of the Northern party with Scott, and if you remember they lived at an ice cave through the Antarctic winter along with Sir Raymond Priestley, and I didn't get on to that, I was too young I think, I hadn't started climbing mountains by that time!

[0:05:47] Lee: What do you remember of the interview, because they seemed to have been rather casual affairs you would say?

Rennie: Well yes, it wasn't vigorous particularly. I don't remember the interview quite honestly, I don't remember much about the interview. I think it was Johnny Green, but it wasn't particularly searching.

[0:06:10] Lee: Did you come across him more than once?

Rennie: The only time I came across Johnny Green was before Christmas in 1955. Two of us had sledged from base down to the Neumayer Channel and they'd organised the *Biscoe*, because we'd found a landing spot there, they could come ashore there, and take sledges and a lot of Peter Hooper's rock samples round to Anvers Island, round to our base on Anvers Island, and what we didn't tell them, but we'd one or two empty sledge boxes, and we just filled these with boulders! I don't think Pete ever knew this, we filled them with boulders so they would think he'd been really collecting some good samples here, but we put them back onboard and they went round to the base actually! [Laughter!]

[0:07:03] Lee: Just for show!

Rennie: Just for show, oh yes!

[0:07:06] Lee: We are leaping ahead here. Now we left you in the middle of the Bay of Biscay, not feeling terribly well, what happened after that?

Rennie: Well things got better, the seas calmed off and it got hotter and hotter. The food on the *Norsel* was pretty basic. You'd sometimes get fish soup made from dried fish and if you were lucky there was the odd ice berg, a hardboiled egg floating around in it! And on Sunday I think we'd even get a tin of fruit salad, that was the highlight of the week really, but the food in fact became much more palatable once we got farther south, the farther south we got it seemed to improve no end, yes, yes!

[0:07:53] Lee: Once you'd picked up stores do you mean?

Rennie: Well, no we were still eating, eating what had been supplied by the Norwegians, by the charter vessel anyway, but I think we all probably lost a lot of weight! On the way down, we weren't particularly fit by the time we got down there we all topped up with steak, egg and chips in Montevideo and extra rations in Port Stanley as well, yes that was good too!

[0:08:21] Lee: Did you ever work out why the food on the Norwegian ship was so poor?

Rennie: Not particularly, probably FIDS hadn't said we want a decent standard of cooking, but there's a little bit, I'm not quite sure it's a book I have looked at fairly recently, that Ken Blaiklock and Derek Searle, you'll have had Ken Blaiklock, have you had Ken Blaiklock? [Lee: No] You have probably had Ken Blaiklock, well he and Derek they had read somewhere from a previous expeditions, that the food on the *Norsel* wasn't so good, and they, the crafty beggars, had gone down to the local shop in London before we sailed and had stocked up with goodies, corned beef and other things to see them through the voyage, while the rest of us just nibbled away at whatever was presented to us! They, funnily enough the lad that shared a cabin with me was a lad called Gordon Farquhar and he was from exactly the same village that my mother was from, south of Glasgow. And he was violently sick the whole way and in the end he had to buy a bottle of whisky from the steward, give the bottle to him and then he would supply him with a great big bag of oranges, and he would just cut them in two and suck everything out and then throw the skin overboard. He survived on oranges for about a fortnight, that's about all he had!

[0:09:50] Lee: Was that right?

Rennie: Yes, he was ill with it, yes, yes.

[0:09:56] Lee: But eventually you hove to in Port Stanley I imagine?

Rennie: That's right, yes.

[0:09:59] Lee: And then what?

Rennie: We were only there a few days, because it was getting very late in the season, it was late in February before we got to Port Stanley. I think we were kitted out and luckily for our new base Anvers, we took on board quite a lot of, some good sledges, a few, a couple of mountain tents, good sleeping bags, good skis that had been transferred from Duncan Carse. He had numerous expeditions on South Georgia, South Georgia Survey, and there was one in '53/54 and all the gear, I think might have been supplied by FIDS in the first place, and luckily it was transferred for us so we inherited some good gear! Because some of the, I won't say the sledges, we also had very old ex-army type sledges which were alright for around the base, but they weren't good sledges for man hauling because we weren't supplied with dogs because they thought Anvers Island was going too mountainous for dogs to be of any real use.

[0:11:07] Lee: That was the reason, yes?

Rennie: In actual fact they would have been very good for laying depots, out in the areas where we were going to be working, but they would have been a bit of a nuisance in the mountain areas I think, because we would have spent a lot of time looking after them I would have thought. But I think we were quite happy man hauling. I know it was very hard work and we seemed to spend a lot of days lying up mainly because we were trying to get round the island, as it was getting along to midwinter. We didn't stop we just wanted to get out and see what there was to see really!

[0:11:43] Lee: So you, did you go straight to Anvers Island?

Rennie: We made one stop at Hope Bay and took on dogs and they were going to base Y, which was for Horseshoe farther south, and the *Norsel*, I think we might have just popped into Port Lockroy and left them some mail or something from Stanley. Then it was straight round to Anvers Island and I think Peter Hopper and Ken Blaiklock and probably one or two others went ashore, to try and find the most suitable base site. They did look at where the American base Palmer, Palmer Station, is now, but it didn't give very good access inland whereas as the site we choose was good access to the hinterland of Anvers.

[0:12:33] Lee: Right, so you were choosing the site nobody had done that?

Rennie: No. I think the *Biscoe* had been down earlier in the season, but hadn't been able to either get ashore or they hadn't actually found a site that was suitable for a base hut, so it was just a case of look see and find the site! And the same day of course we started to unload, and unloading I think we had about 70 tons altogether, and then the *Norsel* stayed with us for

two or three days so we had the help of about another eight or ten people, to start digging, scratching out the foundations for our hut. And then we were left to our own devices for about a week, then the *Norsel* came back again, because it had gone farther south to Horseshoe Island, the ice was closing in so they had to come back! And one or two bits of our hut had actually gone farther south, and luckily they brought them back! And we did have help I must admit it, because we had the *Biscoe* called twice and on both occasions they had ex-hut builders, they had Ralph Lenton and a lad called John Raymond and they both came ashore with sledgehammers, and said 'This wants a bit of straight up lads'! And it was 'Crash, bang, wallop' on the hut and knocked it into place! But we were just living, living in tents, well working all the hours of daylight and then we had a little caboose, just made from boxes built into a little square with a tarpaulin weighted and roped over it. And that's where one of us would cook the meals, and we would go for coffee and things occasional during the day.

[0:14:17] Lee: This all sounds highly unplanned to me!

Rennie: Well I think it probably was. You see we didn't meet till we all got on the ship! Some of them might have had some kind of induction; I know Arthur Shewry, who was down as a carpenter, he'd spent some time in Norwich, at the Boulton and Paul factory. I think he'd seen the hut assembled. It was a bit like a big Meccano, with all the numbers stencilled on and the things and the plans as well, which was all very good. We were very methodical, we laid all various parts out in nice neat piles, but through the night of course it snowed! And we spent the next day searching around for the piece we wanted, so being methodical just didn't work! There again when it came to laying the floor the base of the hut was cross boarded, tongue and groove boarding. Unfortunately we'd had some wet snow and of course the snow froze in the tongues and on the grooves! So to lay one board it was one person sweeping the snow away from where we were laying and the other three were just chiselling the ice out of the groove and the tongue so that we could get them up, so it was very slow and laborious at that stage!

[0:15:46] Lee: And I guess you were losing daylight at this point were you?

Rennie: Well not, I can't just remember it, we might had about ten hours or something like that, it might have been slightly more, I can't honestly remember that, no.

[0:15:59] Lee: At some point, the last ship would have said 'Bye-bye'?

Rennie: That's right!

[0:16:04] Lee: And your hut would have not been finished then?

Rennie: Well it was, I think we might have had the roof on by the time the last, by the time the *Biscoe* sailed for the last time. But we were well enough organised then to, once we had the roof on, probably not felted, but we had the roof on and moved in and I think three of us, I can't just remember when we, you see we didn't land, until really get cracking till the 1st of March. But I think by the middle of April, three of us were off on an exploratory journey, Peter did a sort of a recce. All we did was go up the mountains on the east side of the island

and up to the north of the island, and back again. I did just a very rough sketch map of compass bearings and things like that, but it taught us. But I think Peter might have sledged a little with dogs, but the others hadn't really sledged. I had camped a fair bit in Scotland in the snow, so I'd a rough idea of roughly what to expect. But I think the only fault we made, we took some of Duncan Carse's ex-South Georgia sleeping bags and they were too light and we were all a little bit cold at night, but three of us in the tent so not a lot of room but certainly enough for three, yes!

[0:17:27] Lee: Looking back on this, with wise man's eyes as opposed to young man's eyes, the whole concept of the last ship leaving before the hut was weatherproof and completed, it seemed risky thing to do?

Rennie: Well it could have been, yes. Yes, we would have survived no doubt about that because we had spare depot anyway and all the food for the year was stacked away from the hut itself, all the fuel was away from the hut, so if the hut had gone we would have managed alright I'm sure! But we didn't think about it, health & safety that didn't come into it at all, you just got on and did it really!

[0:18:09] Lee: So how was your own surveying work, was it fun, was it exciting?

Rennie: It was good, but looking back I wish I had been, shall we say, more methodical there, but I had no instructions on what I should do, it was just a case of go and do your best really.

[0:18:29] Lee: Map the island!?

Rennie: Map the island and naturally I was more interested in the more rugged parts, round down the Hopper Glacier and into the eastern mountains. You see Mount Français is what, 9,068 feet high, the highest peak by quite a long way in the whole of that area! And the basin around Bourgon Bay, the Hopper Glacier and the William Glacier were very interesting areas technically for moving around, the trouble was we were too late in the season, we were fighting a losing battle we were into darker periods there! And day after day of screaming winds and blowing about, any good days we were either digging out and drying out or moving! We weren't really, I wasn't getting on with the survey work at all, I was getting an idea where I could come back in summer and hope to establish survey points. There wasn't really hope of doing much useful work there, apart from compass bearings and finding safe routes through the heavily crevassed areas, down through the glacier. And I think there was one period when we were away for, was it, about 16 weeks and you count the days on one hand where could have really done productive work. If we'd been back on the base doing more precise planning for our, where we should concentrate the following year, but we were young and enthusiastic!

[0:20:17] Lee: Then of course the winter arrived and that would have stopped that kind of thing?

Rennie: Well funnily enough it didn't, because in early June we'd been out, up the glacier and we had made contact with Bob Whittock and the other people at Lockroy, and they said 'Oh well come across to us'. 'We'll come across in a boat', so in fact Pete and I both went

across in the boat to Lockroy and then Bob Whittock and a lad called Alan Carroll, they went back to supposedly to bring the other two back who were at our camp on the glacier. But the boat had been late in getting back, so these two said 'Well blow that!' and went back to the tent, and left a note to say they were going to sledge back to the base. So in the end Peter and I spent quite a bit of time at Port Lockroy, and in fact there was three of us at Port Lockroy from Anvers Island, and Peter's probably told this? But we tried to get back by boat down the Neumayer Channel to get back to Anvers Island itself. The first day we were off in fairly good time we made quite good time till halfway across the Newmayer Channel, but then we noticed the engine spluttering and there was a little plug had come out, a little brass plug had come out of the tap for the fuel tank! So we cobbled a little plug out from a piece of wood from a broken oar that happened to be in the boat, stuffed it in, refilled the fuel tank went back to Lockroy, they had a spare tap, they fitted that and we set off again!

[0:22:04] Goodness knows why we set off, but we made good progress again, again just getting into the swell of Cape Lancaster which is the Southern tip of Anvers Island, when the engine packed up again! We didn't, we'd no spares, I don't think we'd any tools or anything like that, so in the end we had to row back to Doumer Island. We managed to get out, we couldn't get the boat out of the water, we must have anchored it with ice axes and things and spent a night ashore. We had a tent with us and I think we had two sleeping bags between three of us, food enough for a picnic and a stove full, a Primus full of fuel, but luckily we did have a decent radio with us, which was most uncommon for us for our sledging operations! So we were able to get in touch with Lockroy and tell them where we were. The following day we tried to row back, we got round past the end of Doumer Island and we could see the lights of Port Lockroy half or quarter a mile away or even more, but we ended up being caught in newly forming sea ice, brash, not brash, pancake ice which is like trying to row through slush. Now this was very hard work you didn't get anywhere at all! So by the time it was dark we rigged the tent up in the boat, put the skis that we had on the bottom of the boat had a bar of chocolate and got in the sleeping bags and stayed like that till the following morning. We thought 'Right we'll make a try and make a real go of getting back to Port Lockroy', we had to try and start the motor without success! But we found that we worked for hours on end, once somebody in the bows trying to smash all this stuff, but it was too slushy and I think Pete who thought getting on his skis he would be able make some progress, I said 'Whatever you do don't try such, it's the last thing you want do'!

[0:24:17] So we spent yet another night trapped in this wretched pancake ice, and of course we were, I think we'd said to the boys at Port Lockroy, which was in fact the main radio station for FIDS in those days, 'Don't say anything to FIDS yet, we'll get ourselves out of this!' Not with very high hope, I must admit, we were both, we were all a bit subdued that night. Anyway the following morning there had been a bit of slight wind and the lead we had made the previous day had opened up a little bit, so we managed to get into this. Apart from two or three areas of frozen seawater, brash, which we had to fight our way through, before dark we managed to get back to Doumer Island and get ashore and pitch the tent, and I remember standing in the bows and jumping out on to what I thought was nice firm ground, of course I went plop into the sea and got thoroughly soaked up to my waist and not feeling

very happy about it! But we managed to unload the boat and get the tent up, and get in the sleeping bags - I think we actually pulled the boat out. I remember we took the outboard motor into the tent, and fiddled about cleaning all the plugs and blew everything and one thing and another, but we never tried it again because A) - it was on trial, and don't know it might not have worked!

[0:25:40] But luckily the radio contact was very good with Port Lockroy and they'd managed to repair an old boat they'd dug out of the ice outside the side of the hut somewhere, and they'd cobbled up another engine. And the following morning they managed to come across to Doumer Island and not to where initially, but they laid a depot of enough food and fuel and things, so it would have been alright if they hadn't been able to get to us again. Meanwhile we'd packed everything up, and carried all the tent and sleeping bags and boxes and radio with us round to where they'd laid this depot. Meanwhile probably Bob Whittock and probably Alan Carroll they'd managed, the ice had been breaking up all the morning so they'd motored up the coast for about half a mile or a mile, got the old boat, our boat we'd been using, into the water, started the engine it went first time! Of course came back to us ferried us all back, and then we were at Port Lockroy for about another week before, so in fact instead of going back by boat they said, 'Well you take us to our landing point, we'll go up and collect our tent and sledge and go back to base'! But there was about six weeks in there which was all a wasted time really, but it was good fun!

[0:27:00] Lee: Now looking back on that, do you think there was some foolishness going on!?

Rennie: Well I think from, from Pete and I previous experience of in a boat with minimum equipment, we would have been far better with enough supplies for a week or something like that, and probably extra fuel than we were carrying, or really waited till conditions really were good. Because it hadn't been bad when we set out, but they could change so dramatically there, we could go round the corner and met a howling gale coming in from the west for all we knew!

[0:27:44] Lee: Did the base's approach to boating change as a result of that?

Rennie: I don't, don't think, they didn't hear about it I don't think! No I don't think we did, we just been delayed!

[0:28:04] Lee: Just sit back a bit and talk a bit about more surveying work, but you obviously, were you surveying purely on land or did you have access to air support at that time?

Rennie: No, not at all, no! And I think it was the back end of 1955 that we heard of that the Aerial Survey Expedition was coming, and I would have thought somebody in Stanley or FIDS generally would have come on to us, 'Well look the Aerial Survey Expedition, for aerial photographs you should be really be concentrating on doing triangulation work, on points that you think will be readily visible and definable from photographs'. I'd never really had any experience of working with aerial photographs before then, and of course it wasn't till I joined FIDASE the following year that I realised what the full potential of the air survey

was for the Antarctic! Trying to survey coastline that was ice cliffs, no access at all, you're really dependent on having safe sea ice to run traverses alongside, to get outline to survey coastline, otherwise you could never get near enough to the cliffs, because of high crevassing, and luckily there was chain of islands that could have been used on Anvers particularly but there again you were involved in boating and entirely dependent on good weather entirely!

[0:29:41] Lee: So you were involved in surveying in the old fashioned way, but knew that aerial surveying was round the corner?

Rennie: Yes.

[0:29:47] Lee: Was that a sign of frustration to you?

Rennie: Yes I think it was, if I'd been notified that this, there was a chance this was going to happen I might have changed my tactics I might have either built cairns, that would be rocky ones or even snow cairns something that I thought would be identifiable on the photographs, and then done survey, done triangulation from these points and just hoping that they would be visible from photographs. That would have been of far more use, but at the end of the day I don't think FIDS, never actually produced maps from the aerial photographs! You see Hunting's they I think they said, they had all the facilities at Elstree for them to produce the maps, but I think it was Overseas Surveys I think they said 'No, they would do it', but I don't think it was ever done quite honestly! But they had quite a sizable coverage of the contracted area of the photographs, but of course not on the actual land survey, because of the helicopters crashed the second year.

[0:31:02] Lee: Was that Tower Island?

Rennie: Tower Island yes, yes that was I've got a date for that and it was about the 10th of December I think?

[0:31:12] Lee: Let's just deal with the first year, first for the moment. [Rennie: Yes.] So your first year was a pastoral year of a little bit of light surveying and a bit of settling into the place?

Rennie: Well you see there was only six of us on the base, one week in six you were cook, one week in six you were gash hand. A lot of the time you could be out surveying or laying depots and things like that, so the actual time around the base there was always jobs to do around the base, humping coal, cutting snow blocks all this kind of thing, painting, painting the outside. I know there was two lads, one called Doug Lichfield who developed a bad back during the first recce journey, and he spent most of his time on base but you know he couldn't really take any active part in the sledging programme or anything like that. And so I won't say he was a passenger or anything like that, he was a bit limited on what he could do and it wasn't fair for him to say 'Well you're going to be camp cook the whole time', that wouldn't have worked out I don't think. But time was limited really, I know with hindsight probably we did spend a fair length of time just feeling our way around, particularly Peter because he wanted to find rocks that he could get his hammer on to! And there wasn't a lot of exposed rock, quite a bit of it was in places that it wasn't easy for him to get to, and in part

that's where the boat at least could get to the shore and cliffs like that, it would have been better for him from his point of view.

[0:33:06] Lee: How did you all get on together was it harmonious?

Rennie: Well I think Johnny Green said, 'How have you got on?' I said 'On the whole fairly well', but we'd have differences of opinion, perhaps I shouldn't tell you this [laughter.].
 Doug Lichfield - I was on cook and I'd been doing a bit of the local survey during the morning, and he'd, I don't know what he'd been doing, and I said 'Lunch will be ready in about 20 minutes'! 'That shite you mean?'! And I said 'Alright, OK'. So I went to back and I happened to have some pastry that I'd been preparing for something else, so I rolled this into a nice shape, rolled it in Nescafe and Cocoa and put it in the oven. And then when he came in, we had a little bit of whatever it was and then I said 'This is for you Doug'!
 [laughter!] And nothing else was said, but he didn't come with his fists and I didn't say anymore I just threw it away, and that was the finish of it! But no, on the whole we didn't have any cliques or anything like that, we all we did get on the whole very well.

[0:34:26] Lee: And you were very much on your own, because you had very little contact with HQ or ...?

Rennie: Well normally any communications would go through Port Lockroy, which was the base radio station. Well our radio operator was a lad called John Canty who was, he'd got his Master's ticket and he knew a bit of Morse not a lot but he could get through! But to transmit radio messages it was a case of sitting in the attic of the hut pedalling a little foot generator, and tapping out on the key! Well as the message got longer the power generator got less and less, so the key was going 'da-dit' very slow, so in the end you used to have to take it in turns to be the pedaller for John to send out the messages! Particularly if they were in code or something it took forever and a day! We could, the operator at Port Lockroy could speak to us on voice, but we never seemed to be able to get through to him on voice, it was a pretty tedious sort of thing so there weren't a lot of messages flying backwards and forwards between the two of us!

[0:35:49] Lee: And therefore very little chance of anybody elsewhere telling you what to do?

Rennie: Well that's right yes, yes, and yet as I think I said there, the following year just one year later with FIDASE we had a VHF little packs of transmitters and they were absolutely brilliant! We could use them from ship to shore, and on one occasion I remember Peter Mott we had one with us on Cape Anna, and there was one of the Canso flying boats coming over and we had a three way conversation! Between the ship, ourselves on the shore and the cockpit of the Canso, just showing how well organised you could be with communications which was crucial really on FIDASE!

[0:36:41] Lee: So did you feel very isolated at Anvers or were you OK?

Rennie: No, we could get a little bit, we had a Bush radio we had a wind generator charging, the 12 volt batteries, 24 volt batteries so we did have that. But we didn't use it an awful lot,

we had a wind-up gramophone so that was about it! But of course the following year they did put in a diesel generator for Anvers, yes.

[0:37:17] Lee: Which meant you had access to the radio more frequently?

Rennie: Well presumably but I was only there for the one season, yes.

[0:37:23] Lee: So you did the one winter at Anvers [Rennie: Yes.] and then so what happened the following summer?

Rennie: Well I, I came back on the *Shackleton*, the RRS *Shackleton* via one or two other bases, Base O I think we went ashore and helped in building that, we spent a bit of time at Deception Island and we actually called in at King George Island as well, then back to Stanley and then home! By I suppose the end of May and I spent quite a lot of time at DOS in Tolworth writing reports and doing a lot of work from the photographs that had been taken, trying to piece together a better map than the existing one of Anvers Island! And then I think it was probably around about September time and I was approached by Peter Mott, who was leader of FIDASE, saying was I looking for a job, but really offering me a job, they were looking for a surveyor. Because they'd had four surveyors with them the first year, the surveyors were OK but they weren't, the helicopter was landing them but they weren't taking advantage of hills they could have easily climbed or they thought they couldn't climb! But they could have climbed probably, with my climbing experience certainly my experience on Anvers I fitted in very well with his idea of thinking! So I left FIDS and went with Hunting Aero Surveys.

[0:39:04] Lee: So where were you based for the second winter?

Rennie: Well the surveyors were all based on the *Oluf Sven* [Lee: Oh really?]. The idea was working from photographs they had perhaps got in their first season, not very many but they had some very good flights early on in the second season. They would go out and fly for approximately 12 hours at a time, and the film exposed during the day would be brought to Deception and processed, and then alternate copies, contact prints, were taken and then stapled together to get, they could build up a mosaic on the coverage they had obtained on that flight that day. And using photographs and the existing maps we could start to build up a pattern of where we wanted to operate. Then of course it was on Tower Island on the 10th of December which really was our first full operating day with the helicopter. We'd had one or two little trial runs, the helicopter took off with a lad called John Cheal, who was an ex-Fid, landed him with survival gear.

[0:40:13] And he put up a tent, I think got in touch with the *Sven* saying 'Chopper on its way back'. The chopper came and took a second surveyor John Noble, another Fid, well he'd been seconded from FIDS, they circled over the tent that John Cheal had put up, and then they were caught in a sudden down draft of wind probably a katabatic, I'm sticking my neck out there, but they were dropped, even on full power he couldn't climb against the power of the wind! And they did two big bounces, landed up upside down about half a mile away from the tent. Well John Noble had never flown in a helicopter in his life before and he said

‘Hells bells this is a bit of a rough landing!!’ But luckily neither of them were hurt, the helicopter was a write off because the rotor blade was in bits and the bubble was smashed and various bits were tangled! So they made their way back, they found their way back to the tent which was virtually on the highest point on Tower Island and they got in touch with the *Sven*. So three of us were taken off in one of the *Oluf Sven*’s lifeboats, there was Tony Bancroft who was the leading surveyor for Hunting’s at that time, Jan Patcha who was the second pilot and the engineer for the helicopter and myself as the lead mountaineer. And they landed us on the beach and we took a tent and food and Primus and things like that, and stacked them on the beach and then the three of us walked up to the tent, I can’t remember it didn’t take up all that long because it was a fairly easy gentle slope, and then we went down and looked at the wreckage, and looted everything that was worthwhile, battery, radio and things like that and we used the luggage stays like a sledge to drag them up. By this time, I mean it was getting dark so it meant there was six of us in a normal two man pyramid tent, I think we had three sleeping bags between us and we had a Primus, we did have food but I remember sleeping in the tent cover! But not feeling at all cold, we all had a good night but the trouble was Jan Patcha was a Czech, he’d been in a concentration camp during the war, and he couldn’t stand anybody touching him! So Jan Patcha had about a third of the tent and the rest of us just heaped together on the rest of the tent! Then the following day we were able to get in touch with the *Sven*, they sent a lifeboat out and took us back to the tent.

[0:43:16] But from then until the 26th of January with no means of carrying on the survey as far as Huntings was concerned, and there was a lot of telegrams to & fro between Deception Island and London or Tolworth! I forget the guy in charge at Tolworth, but he was saying ‘Well why can’t you do it, from just do astro fixes?’ Well that was a nonstarter from the beginning, you might have had about three nights in the season to do anything worthwhile there, so in the end I think with pressure from Huntings and other groups in London, they were set on to get and provide another helicopter! I think it might have sounded a lot in those days, £5000 in those days, but it was really peanuts compared with the outlay for flying boats and the ship and things like that. But the helicopters didn’t get back again till the 26th of January, which meant that the observation period for the surveyors based on the *Sven*, was down to about eight weeks. Meanwhile we’d been landed on King George Island, and we had to move around in small dinghies. At onetime they were going to leave us a surfboat from the *Oluf Sven*, but they decided they couldn’t risk us with that(!) even though they were prepared to have one of the crew to operate it. So all we were using were outboards, outboard dinghies - we’d borrowed one dinghy and we had a thing called a boat impeller.

[0:45:08] Lee: A what?

Rennie: A boat impeller. It wasn’t a Seagull, it was more like a food mixer, it was pretty useless! You, it was very hard to steer it, you’d go round in circles at the slightest touch, but we were based at the FIDS base on King George Island and we had help from them with small boats for ferrying us around. We managed to, we measured the baseline and we had a set of photographs so we got the start of the triangulation system, for the control for the photographs on King George Island. Until the *Oluf Sven* came back and took us back to Deception Island, but that wasn’t not till about the 26th of January as far as I remember.

[0:45:51] Lee: Did you get your second helicopter at that point?

Rennie: We did, yes, but it was delayed in Montevideo, they sent the wrong bubble or the bubble arrived cracked! And something else was missing, so we were getting very frustrated or our leader Peter Mott was getting very frustrated on Deception Island. The Canso planes were getting good cover, photographic cover, but the ground cover had hardly started! So once that came we had to, well we worked every hour of good weather, we were prepared to work to carry on, and on some days, I think the best day we managed to move the survey by about 50 miles in one day! Just by well coordinated helicopter movements, and good movements by the ship as well.

[0:46:43] Lee: So were you flying on the Canso's, on the helicopters?

Rennie: No, no they had the photographic crews.

[0:46:50] Lee: You were dealing with the progress on land?

Rennie: No we were being put ashore [Lee: Oh I see!] to do the triangulation scheme. You measured a baseline and we were landed on various suitable points.

[0:47:03] Lee: You had one rather iffy helicopter landing I believe?

Rennie: Oh, no I think that was a takeoff was it?

[0:47:10] Lee: Oh a takeoff?

Rennie: Oh well, I can't just remember, when was that?

[0:47:14] Lee: The end of February 1956, it says 1997 here it must be 1957!

Rennie: 1957?

[0:47:26] Lee: Cape Anna!

Rennie: Oh yes, yes, well a chap called John Noble and I, we'd been stuck on Cape Anna for, oh, quite a number of days - it was a dodgy place for a helicopter to land anyway! And we'd had very strong winds there, and it was a rocky site so we had the base, the apex of the tent was, there was a climbing rope threaded over the top of that, tied to big boulders, and masses of boulders piled around the skirt but the wind was still getting underneath! And I think, well we slept in our climbing gear shall we say and everything else was packed, we didn't have food out or anything like that, we were just in our sleeping bags with most of our gear on. But then eventually the weather did break up and it was John Noble who was with me and took the helicopter down, gusting 30, gusting 40 and he managed to get away quite nicely! And then it came back to me, it landed and it had rubber floats on, and it could sort of propel itself across to where I was standing with the tent and all the other gear that I had to lash on as quick as I could, and then we waited till I thought it was reasonably calm and I climbed aboard and got my belt on. And we took off and we rose to 300 feet very, very quickly and the next thing the air disappeared and we dropped like a stone to within Jan

Pachta reckoned (he was a Czech), to within about 100 feet! But with the slope of the ground, we managed to just pull away on full power! And I remember Jan, who'd I think had spent a bit of time in a concentration camp, all he said was 'Oh, bloody hell!! Oh, bloody hell!!' [Laughter!] That was all he would ever say!

[0:49:42] Lee: In May 1955 you had a problem is that by depot laying by boat with Peter Hooper, is that the one you have already described to me, it is isn't it?

Rennie: May, I can't just remember, where was that to?

[0:49:57] You were laying a depot of sledging rations and fuel and had difficulty in getting away from the beach.

Rennie: Oh that's right yes, yes.

[0:50:04] Lee: Again a problem with the outboard motor.

Rennie: Yes that's right yes. That was heading around towards Mount William which along the south coast of Anvers. We thought if we could lay a depot there it would save us probably a couple of days' sledging up to our normal sledge supply up on Plateau, and then quite a long walk in to what we called Windy Alley, which was near Mount William, between Mount William and I think, I forget the other name! Anyway we, Pete and I, we tried one Sunday and had to turn back because of ice, then I think it was on my screen yes?

[0:50:53] Lee: Under 'Near misses'!

Rennie: Under 'Near misses' was it? What? Oh right yes, yes we'd actually found a good place to lay the depot. We'd had a bit of trouble getting ashore - I think if we'd gone a bit to one side we'd have found a nice gravel beach! We laid a depot and then we tried to get off and we lost an oar and the wind was blowing off shore, the engine had almost dropped off the back of the boat and we were very light - we'd had probably three or four sledge ration boxes, which would have given us about 200 pounds of ballast, and fuel cans, and we started to be swept out to sea, and then we got into the lee of quite a big ice berg, and we managed to get the engine going again and well strapped on! And then we had to haul on to get back to the shore, and the only place we could see to get on was a really little very shallow gulley. Luckily we got on the crest of a wave and we shot up this little gulley and I wasn't ready to jump out, however we got swept back again pulled out by the sea, on the next one I managed to jump out with the anchor hook and the rope! I managed to hold Pete so that he didn't get pulled out and then we managed to haul the boat up on to the beach, got it unloaded and put a tent up and got ourselves reasonably organised and pulled the boat up as far as we could and tied it on, anchored it so hopefully it wouldn't get swept away! I think we lost an oar getting off on the first bit, the second day it didn't particularly improve I think we were tent bound the next day, the following day we went back and thought the only way we can get the boat out was to lift it over about a three foot high shelf. So we did that by rocking it one side and putting stones and really jacked it up manually till we could get the bow just on to the lip of this ice thing, then I don't how we did it either Pete was pushing or I was pulling.

[0:53:19] Lee: You shared it?

Rennie: Once it was on to the snow it moved easily and then we pulled it several hundred yards across to near where we laid the depot, and then put the tent up, and pulled it down to a much easier beach. By this time I think we were both pretty tired and I said that 'If we set off now and we hit any snags we are not going to be in any fit state to do anything about it!' So we spent another night; I seemed to remember the Primus wasn't functioning very well, I think we hadn't any Primus needles to clear the jet and it was a bit smoky and smelt, but the following day we managed to get away and I think that was about it, but it was a bit of a dodgy do, and we had other dodgy do's as well! Perhaps you don't want to hear about those?

[0:54:15] Lee: Well you had a funny moment as well, when you were doing gash hand and work, and the ice disappeared from beneath you?

Rennie: Yes that's right, not as they are now everything that goes in comes out.

[0:54:28] Lee: Yes, very different environment!

Rennie: It was heave it over the cliff. I think I was probably on gash and on my job to get rid of the collimated rubbish of the week, and the usual quickest way was to just tip it over the ice cliff! Well I went and thought I'd got most of it over and there's always little one bit had been left, and I took a step forward and kicked it and of course the ice behind me and in front of me went with a whoosh! And I was dropped within about a couple of feet of the sea, which was probably about 15 feet or so below and I wasn't really dressed for spending a few hours!

[0:55:07] Lee: You'd just nipped outside!

Rennie: I'd just nipped outside, it was only about what, 50 yards or so from the hut! The guys in the hut they wouldn't have been particularly bothered about me going to ditch the gash anyway, so despite quite a lot of shouting and whistling nothing happened! So by this time I was getting fairly cool so it was a case of get on and climb out, so luckily I managed to climb out and they thought it was a huge joke, you see when I got back! But it could have been quite serious really, but nowadays it would all be flattened and placed in a bin or skip or something to be taken back to Cambridge.

[0:55:48] Lee: Yes environmental endeavours in those more rudimental shall we say!

Rennie: Oh yes, very much so. Well I know the 'thunder box' was just usually a flour tin and when that was full to capacity, the idea was try and get it land on a floe and hope it would make its own way to wherever!! It seemed to work generally, it seemed to work generally.

[0:56:22] Lee: Let's just spend a few moments talking about Mount Français? [Rennie: Yes.] This I presume you climbed this mountain in December 1955 for business purposes?

Rennie: Oh yes of course.

[0:56:35] Lee: With your background in mountaineering it must have been quite exciting?

Rennie: Well it was, it was yes!

[0:56:41] Lee: Was it a big challenge?

Rennie: Well we'd been unable to see into an area north of Mount Français, there is a big area that we'd no idea what it looked like at all. You know from the sea coming in it was blocked by mountains all along the coastline and we hadn't actually been able to get to it from the west. Well I think Peter had had a look but I don't think they had got in very far and so we thought if we climb Français, it will be all laid out in front of us. So there was four of us set out: there was Arthur Shewry who was the deputy leader, John Canty who the radio operator and Bill Hindson and myself. Bill Hindson was a midshipman on loan from the navy, he was Assistant Surveyor as well and we set off and established quite a good camp at, well it's a col between a mountain which is now Mount Reading in actual fact, and on Mount Français and was just over 4000 feet and it was at the edge of the step leading up, we thought it was probably the easiest way if we could climb this step up. It looked to be a very open climb to the summit of Mount Français. The route that I would have gone for was obviously more interesting, was from the south side up a very long ridge which was in fact the other people climbed it subsequently. But that would have involved a slightly longer climb, whereas here we were starting at over 4000 feet and we had one or two days half decent weather not long after we arrived. And we, I cracked what we thought was the hardest thing, a deep slope with a bit of a overhanging piece. At the top of this slope, the ground was falling away very steeply, steeply from this col and a slip would have been, would have been a couple of thousand feet anyway, you wouldn't have survived that I don't think! And we had to wait a long time, I'm just not sure what the date was, 7th of December?

[0:59:07] Lee: 7th of December 1955!

Rennie: Yes 7th of December yes, yes we were supposedly getting weather reports passed on through Port Lockroy, we had a little receiver with us, they would pass on messages to us, but the people in Stanley weren't very good at remembering to say what the weather was going to be like! We were always awake and ready early, at first light, to seize any opportunity. But in the end on that date we all set off, but John Canty wasn't really fit, Bill Hindson and Arthur Shewry and myself we were all fit, because we'd been sledging, while John had been base bound and he complained of getting cramp in his legs, so we had to return a few hundred feet till he was on safe ground and he went back the tent, and we carried on. And I just forget how many hours I know we were away for just over, just about 12 hours for the whole day, so I'm pretty sure we climbed it in about 6½ hours! There were one or two bits of crevasse, things like that to negotiate, but nothing really that upset us at all. We moved, we just moved slowly and steadily and Bill and Arthur although they were fit, they hadn't been on sort of a long haul shall we say but we got to the top! And of course the cloud came down and we saw virtually nothing at all, nothing of what we had hoped to see!

[01:00:46] So you couldn't, you couldn't do anything useful!

Rennie: No, no, and in fact the cloud was coming down a little bit and we'd an awful long way, I think we had about a 12 mile round trip and a lot of it was over the edge round the

cornice on the highest slopes of Français and Mount Agamemnon I think it's called, yes Mount Agamemnon, so from a survey point of view it wasn't very helpful at all I'm afraid.

[01:01:20] Lee: But fun!

Rennie: It was great fun yes, yes!

[01:01:24] Lee: Is that your overriding memory of the Antarctic the fun, was it more than that?

Rennie: No, no, it was satisfaction. We know we did things, we got things done, we didn't do as much surveying as I would have liked to have done, and I had trouble with one of the theodolites that we had left down what we called Windy Alley, which is now in fact Hopper Glacier. It had been buried under lots of snow, and the bubble used for taking vertical angles was broken, it had fractured, I don't think it was the cold, I don't think it would have fractured with the cold, I don't know how it broke. But we had some very mixed weather, even in the summer we had a few weeks in the middle of the summer, when Peter Hopper and I were there working and moving round, but we also had long days of being unable to move either through low cloud or bad snow conditions, and heavily crevassed areas, it was a very heavily crevassed area!

[01:02:32] Lee: What's interesting is even 50 years after the event your memory is so clear, it must have made a huge impression!?

Rennie: Yes it was, yes it was the highlight of my life I'm sure!

[01:02:41] Lee: Do you think so?

Rennie: I do yes, yes! You know with being interested in climbing whatever they were paying me I'd have given them that for the chance to go down there! I know lads who have worked who probably had better jobs than I had, because I was with the Ordnance Survey they didn't pay top whack by any means, but FIDS were paying about the same as I was getting on the Ordnance Survey, and yet when I transferred to Huntings I was getting about three times I was getting on FIDS! Which was quite good.

[01:03:20] Lee: Jim Rennie thank you for sharing your memories.

Rennie: Right, fine, thank you.

Interesting clips:

- Very poor food on the charter vessel *Norsel*!! [0:07:06]
- Building the base hut at Anvers Island. [0:12:33]
- Visiting Port Lockroy and getting stuck! [0:20:17]
- Pedal powered radio! [0:34:26]
- Helicopter crash on Tower Island in 1957! [0:40:13]

- Being stuck at Cape Anna, and hairy helicopter flight out! [0:47:26]
- Near miss while laying a depot! [0:50:53]
- Hairy gash hand moment!. [0:54:28]
- First ascent of Mount Français 7th of December, 1955. [0:56:41]