

Malcolm Phelps

Interviewed by Jack Tolson at home in Brixham in Devon on 30.07.2009 . BAS Archives AD6 24.1.43.1. Transcribed by Neil MacPherson on 28/01/2019.

(0:00:22) Tolson: Malcolm, can we start with your pre-FIDS time? Just take me back to your early days at sea, your cadetship. When you went to sea for a start.

Phelps: Yes, I went to sea in 1946/47. I joined P and O as an apprentice three and a half years, having done a pre-sea training course of a year at Warsash in Southampton and I did three and a half years with P and O on cargo ships and passenger ships and I left and went up for a Second Mate's ticket. I joined Clan Line, I got TB then which occupied about 18 months and then I went back to sea on a cable ship, All-America Cable and Wireless, operating Irish Sea, Grand Banks off Newfoundland, off Cape Hatteras and also deep water jobs in the middle of the Atlantic. That occupied the best part of a year and then I came home and went on various other ships. I got a First Mate's certificate and I was on landing craft. LST's, carrying the Army around and I was with banana ships for a while, two years, and then I joined BAS in 1965.

(0:01:31) Tolson: If we go back to your very early days, your going to sea in late 1940's just starting the War, take me back to your cadetships, or I guess it's your apprenticeship, pretty rough and ready time, was it?

Phelps: No, I was with P and O. I was very fortunate because the first 18 months I was on a white cruise ship, the old *Sussex* and I learned a lot there, and then I went on to passenger ships which I wasn't very imbued with and I left P and O and went back to cargo ships with Clan Line for 18 months.

(0:02:16) Tolson: Ok, very early BAS, tell me about your first ship with BAS and when that was.

Phelps: I joined the *John Biscoe* in Stanley having got off the *Perla Dan* in January 1965, and Tom Woodfield was Master. He'd just taken over as Master because the previous Master had to go home ill, sick.

(0:02:45) Tolson: Do you remember what it was that inspired you to go to Antarctica? You'd been on a wide range of other commercial ships, why suddenly Antarctica?

Phelps: Interest and I preferred the cold weather. I didn't like the Tropics round the Indian coast. Just interest.

(0:03:09) Tolson: Where had you gathered your interest from? What little knowledge..?

Phelps: Well I'd met somebody locally who was an engineer on the *John Biscoe* and he told me about it and I found out a lot from him and then I applied and I joined in January 1965. Took it on from there.

(0:03:27) Tolson: And the place where you had your interview I imagine was Gillingham Street. Who conducted your interview, do you remember?

Phelps: I think it was Bill Sloman, yes, and Eric Salmon. Yes, it was in Gillingham Street.

(0:03:44) Tolson: What was your first voyage like?

Phelps: Well I was Second Officer and I was picking everything up. There was a lot to pick up because a lot of boat work and scow¹ was completely different to a merchant ship, with all the scow work and launch work, landing cargo. I found it very interesting talking to the scientists and the GA's, mountaineers, a wide spectrum of people on the ship, BAS employ. So that's what made it interesting for me. I thought 'Well, this is it, I never want to leave BAS', because I'd been in the general merchant navy and I think if I hadn't have joined BAS I would have probably left the sea and taken up flying.

(0:04:29) Tolson: How long did you remain Second Mate for?

Phelps: Only half a voyage. When the ship got back to the UK I became Chief Officer and I was Chief Officer for seven years. I became Master in 1972.

(0:04:43) Tolson: Tell me about your role in general as Chief Officer. You were exclusively on the *John Biscoe*, you must have had some moments with cargo work, weather problems, anything that particularly stands out?

Phelps: You want a disaster? [laughs]

(0:05:09) Tolson: Oh, give me some disaster.

¹ A wooden barge used to transfer cargo from ship to shore at bases where the ship was unable to go alongside.

Phelps: Well I sank a scow in Deception, overloaded it. I think we got it back a few months later. We managed to raise it but it was never the same again because it's a wooden one and its seams were strained.

(0:05:25) Tolson: Deception Island, fascinating island with three different nations' scientific bases on it, were you at that time supplying for the British base?

Phelps: Yes we were, and refuelling it.

(0:05:37) Tolson: Tell me about the British base on the volcanic island.

Phelps: It was a comfortable base, it was the old whalers' station. I think BAS had built a hut there for themselves but it was a comfortable base. But it was a depressing place. I think it was depressing for the people there. It was a volcano, an extinct volcano.

(0:06:02) Tolson: They had an airstrip there, didn't they?

Phelps: They did, yes, because the aircraft then used to fly down to Adelaide from there at the beginning of the season. The aircraft wintered at Deception, single Otter, and then fly down with spare fuel drums in the back to refuel on the way. They had a few adventures, I think, the aircraft, in those days but their main job was taking depots out for the sledging parties, dog-sledging parties.

(0:06:40) Tolson: Malcolm, the atmosphere on board the *John Biscoe* , the ship that you spent your entire BAS career with, what was that like?

Phelps: It was a very happy, relaxed atmosphere, everybody got on really well together. As far as the crew was concerned, we had a mixture of Falkland Islanders and UK and the officers were all UK people and the scientists were mainly UK. They were all very friendly, young, average age under 30, scientists, base personnel. I think that's what made it for me, such a happy atmosphere on the ship. Lots of people to chat to when you were off duty, or on duty.

(0:07:24) Tolson: What was the ..., from the time that the ship left the UK because the scientists would join the ship, wouldn't they, in the UK?

Phelps: Yes, yes. A few would fly out to Montevideo, join there, senior people, but in those days the majority sailed from the UK and the Stonington people of course were on for over three months before they got to Stonington. If we had Stonington people going to Halley as well, they

could be on for three to four months. If we left Southampton in September, they could be January before they got off in Stonington, and Adelaide.

(0:08:03) Tolson: What would the Fids, as they were called, do on those long passages?

Phelps: Well they worked under.... the mate, gave them jobs, painting, chipping. I think they did a certain amount of study for themselves, for the future, but not a lot. I think it was mainly sunbathing and a bit of work on deck.

(0:08:26) Tolson: Were they involved in steering the ship or?

Phelps: I can't remember that. They could have been.² I think we trained one or two but you can't have inexperienced people steering so they'd have had to be trained if they were going to do that, but I can't remember that. We had one bloke, Phil Wainwright, he was very keen on deck work. He lives near here. He was in Stonington for two years at least, three years I think he did there altogether. '68, '69 and '70.

(0:09:04) Tolson: You were mate for ...?

Phelps: Seven years.

(0:09:13) Tolson: What was it that you enjoyed about the mate's role?

Phelps: Well I think I enjoyed the boat work and the launch work, getting the cargo ashore. It was always a challenge and I had a very good crew and a very good bosun which made it a lot easier. There was a lot of experience and I had to learn a lot because I was new and I picked up a lot from the crew actually and, of course, the Captain, Tom Woodfield.

(0:09:40) Tolson: In your early days as Chief Officer, what was your recollections of the bases because they were then quite a number in the '60's, there were quite a number of bases still operational with BAS? Were they fairly small units?

Phelps: Yes, they were. Of course, Stonington was a sledging base, I suppose a 12-man base and it was a very happy atmosphere there with the..... they all had stoves, it was completely different to now [with] big bases like Rothera. I suppose they must get on very well now but they certainly did in those days.

² [Transcriber's note: Fids were used for steering watches, usually in open sea and as stand-ins when crew were temporarily unavailable.]

(0:10:23) Tolson: Very, very compact, small units.

Phelps: Yes, small, yes.

(0:10:27) Tolson: What sort of science were they doing in ...?

Phelps: Well Stonington, I'm going on about Stonington. Stonington was geology and glaciology, surveying. Adelaide was 'Met' and I think they let off Met balloons, upper atmosphere, because Halley Bay was upper atmosphere. Signy was biology, mainly biology, and freshwater biology.

(0:10:52) Tolson: I suppose on the way down if Stonington was a doggie base, would you be carrying dogs ever on board the ships?

Phelps: We did shift dogs from base to base but they were never on for more than 24, 36 hours. We had to space them out, the ones that had vendettas against one another, the fighters. One of the Fids did that. We put one of the noisy ones outside the Chief Engineer's cabin [laughs], 'Digger' [phonetic] Ward, it was a bloke called 'Digger' Ward in those days.

(0:11:28) Tolson: Did you do sealing with relish, going off hunting seals?

Phelps: Well it was exercise, it was getting off the ship. It was an unfortunate thing to have to do to kill the seals and (we) didn't do it with relish but it was a job and we did it. They did use them for scientific research, they took a lot of specimens from them. So I suppose that gave a certain validity to it in our minds, but it was mainly to feed the dogs obviously.

(0:12:01) Tolson: When it came to becoming Captain, did it suddenly hit you or were you anticipating it?

Phelps: Yes, I think any Master will tell you that when he becomes Master it's the first time he realises that he's got nobody to turn to. When you've got a problem on the bridge you can always phone up the 'old man, and suddenly you can't because you're it, so you're phoning up yourself [laughs].

(0:12:28) Tolson: Who was your Captain before you became Captain and what advice did that person give?

Phelps: John Cole. Yes, well he was very kind and he offered to let me bring the ship alongside the public jetty in Stanley once, but I refused because I didn't want to break the jetty in his name [laughs].

(0:12:50) Tolson: Did he actually give you any good advice about being a Master before he..?

Phelps: I don't think he needed to really. I just watched him and Tom. No, I don't think he needed to. He helped me with a lot of the paperwork before I took over, so I knew exactly what I had to do.

(0:13:09) Tolson: So what was the season that you took over as Master?

Phelps: '72, 1972, yeah.

(0:13:21) Tolson: And first season as Master was it a great moment of sort of personal triumph or were you ...?

Phelps: A lot of concentration. I had to concentrate. I enjoyed that, yes, enjoyed it. Can't remember any actual events on this particular voyage but, yes, it went well. But they were long voyages because in those days we were doing full voyages, a full seven to eight months, whereas now it's four on and four off. And in my latter years it was four on and four off which made it a lot easier because really full voyages were a bit pressurising in that job.

(0:13:57) Tolson: The late '70's the *John Biscoe* started to do a new type of work and it was really, I suppose, the advent of BAS marine scientific operations. Can you tell me a little bit about what you were trying to undertake and what it actually eventually led on to - i.e. the conversion of the *Biscoe*?

Phelps: When we started off we had no special equipment for putting gear over the side or deploying it is the correct word, I think, sounds more professional. We just had to use the derricks and we were endeavouring to do vertical casts with the CTD³ which of course didn't work because we couldn't hold the ship head to wind with no bow thruster and the CTD was leading off miles upwind so we gave that up, I think, after a while. But it was very useful for people like Doug Bowen, they could see what they had to do and what would be required on the new ship and when we refitted, we had the refit in 1980, a major refit, new engines and we had the winches put aboard and a big A-frame on the stern, I think it was a 5-tonne A-frame. Then of

³ A **CTD** is an **oceanography** instrument used to measure the conductivity, temperature, and pressure of seawater. [Wikipedia].

course we could operate. We could do the vertical cast with the CTD and we could tow the undulating oceanographic recorder, all the sampling equipment, horizontal sampling equipment. The old *Biscoe* was very efficient for what she had to do. We took a German party down, because they were going to build their new ship and they wanted to see how we operated and they were very impressed with what we were doing and how well the ship operated.

(0:15:42) Tolson: To be suddenly thrown into doing marine science when you'd really been a logistical platform, how did you take to that and how in fact did you feel that the crew in general sort of took to it?

Phelps: I think the crew after a while found it a bit tedious because it's very repetitive doing station after station, week after week and a lot of rough weather. But then we did intersperse it with a base, we still relieved Signy and went down to Faraday. So they still got the cargo work and we used to do geological landings around South Georgia, a lot of that. So there was a lot of activity going on, a lot of boat work, we'd have two or three inflatables away at the same time, so the crew got plenty of exercise in that respect.

(0:16:34) Tolson: In the various boating operations that you did, particularly around South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, how did things evolve in the time that you were.... ?

Phelps: When I first joined we did all our landings, landing geologists, geophysicists in camps with the launch and the scow, but very often just the launch and with the swell running it was quite tricky at times because the launch was grinding against the rocks and people were trying to leap ashore between grindings and then eventually we lost the launch in... can't remember which... We got it back but she got carried on a swell in the Bay of Isles in South Georgia. She got carried away up the beach and it took a day to get her back again because she'd dug herself into the ash. And we got her back and then we got *Geminis* after that, inflatables, from the RNLI. That's what we should have had before really because doing landings with launches is indescribably tricky at times and dangerous. So the inflatables made life very easy for us and they've still got them. In fact I think they've got rigid inflatables now, bigger ones. Ours were fine and we used them a lot. We could land a whole camp with them, we could land enough tents and store food for several days, three weeks with three *Geminis*, and we did frequently.

(0:18:05) Tolson: Was there an awful lot of scientific activity being done around the island of South Georgia.

Phelps: Yeah, around South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. Geologists and geophysicists.... not geophysicists, glaciologists. No surveyors, I don't remember surveyors around South Georgia and of course they were doing a survey of the reindeer. There was a Vet at

South Georgia at one time. We took him around occasionally. But we went right round South Georgia and I think I anchored just about everywhere there was to anchor, out in the open, off Cape Disappointment and there was some very good anchorages, Hound Bay and round Cape Rosa.

(0:18:52) Tolson: About the Stonington weather?

Phelps: Well yes, Stonington. Down Neny Fjord they got katabatic winds up to 100, well over 100 knots and you get blown out of there. Always approaching there we'd ask the base what the wind was like and of course actually at the base the wind would be quite light. It could be 10 knots and a few hundred yards out into the water it would be blowing a hoolie. So they wanted their mail so they'd tell us there was no wind [laughs]. No, we knew there was a wind there but that was the story.

(0:19:30) Tolson: Can you tell me about your very early entry into the Merchant Navy? In fact, why you even wanted to go to sea in the first place and how you then took on board the training, where you went?

Phelps: Well I think when I was small boy, seven or eight years old, we went to the seaside, holidays. That's where I wanted to go to sea from then onwards, never wanted to do anything else. I wanted to join the Royal Navy but during war I missed a year's schooling, so I had to catch up and I entered the Merchant Navy later on going to a training ship in Southampton and I did a year there and then I joined P and O as an apprentice for three and a half years on cargo ships and passenger ship - Australia mainly, and New Zealand. They were refrigerated ships, general cargo out and refrigerated cargo home, meat and fruit but mainly meat. We went all round Australia and New Zealand. In those days ships spent a long time in port, up to sometimes three weeks in Sydney. We'd go right round from Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle, Cairns, right up in the tropics, then across to New Zealand. Six month voyage, out through the Suez Canal and back through the Panama. So it was very interesting for a 17 year-old. I did that for 18 months and then I went on to passenger ships, which I didn't enjoy quite so much, I didn't find it very interesting.

(0:21:14) Then I left and sat for my Second Mate's certificate, which took a year and then I joined Clan Line, which was a large company in those days, about 60 ships, running round India. then I got TB and that took 18 months of my life up being sick and then I went on a cable ship for a year working in the Irish Sea, North Atlantic and off the Banks of Newfoundland 'cos trawlers break the cable and it was going from one repair job to another non-stop. And then off Cape Hatteras and the odd mid-Atlantic job and I found that extremely interesting because I'd never done anything like that before. After that I went for another certificate, Master's certificate,

and then I went back on to cargo ships, banana ships and landing craft, LST's carrying troops and tanks around and we invaded Suez. I did that for about 18 months and then I went on a banana ship for two years and I did a delivery job, dredger to Calcutta, and then I joined BAS and BAS has been the most interesting job I've had. Interesting job, interesting people, interesting life.

(0:22:38) Tolson: What was it that gave you the thought of joining BAS? You'd never been anywhere like that before?

Phelps: I'd read a little bit about the Antarctic but not a lot. I wasn't knowledgeable. When I went for my interview I think if they'd ask me anything about the history of the Antarctic I probably couldn't have told them, or very little. I did meet somebody, an engineer off the *John Biscoe* at home here and he told me a lot about it and that aroused my interests and that was when I joined BAS, or applied to join BAS, and I stayed with them. I never wanted to do anything else.

(0:23:17) Tolson: Tell me about your entry into BAS. At what level and indeed what ship were you on?

Phelps: I joined the *John Biscoe* in Stanley in the Falkland Islands as Second Officer because the Captain had been flown home sick and Captain Woodfield took over, Tom Woodfield took over as Captain and then I joined as Second Officer and I stayed as Second Officer for the rest of that voyage. When the ship got home in the spring, back to the UK, I became Mate and I stayed Mate for seven years and then in 1972 I became Master. So I did nineteen years as Master and seven years as Mate.

(0:23:58) Tolson: In the years that you were Mate was there anything extraordinary in your career? Any horrible moments, anything that you look back wishing perhaps that you (would want to) forget?

Phelps: Well I sank the scow in Deception Island. I was responsible for overloading it and we did get a bad.... the planks had been sprung, she wasn't much use after that. She was used for a year or two. So that wasn't a success.

(0:24:30) Tolson: Was BAS an organisation that was.... Did you come into it thinking: 'Gosh, they're a bit carefree'?

Phelps: No, no, no. I thought BAS was run on very relaxed lines but very careful. Everything was thought out, preplanned. All the itineraries, ships were well run and the bases were well run. No, I thought it was a safe operation, but an easy atmosphere. Not bureaucratic.

(0:25:02) Tolson: What was the *John Biscoe* like in the '60's? As Chief Officer you were responsible, presumably in Southampton, England, loading her up with stores and embarking scientists to take South.

Phelps: It was a very busy time loading and getting ready to sail but she was an old-fashioned ship actually for her year, the derricks and the hatchboards. But she was a very seaworthy ship. Very, very seaworthy. She rode out some very, very...we were in very severe gale off Cape Horn once, just southwest of Cape Horn and our Second Officer at the time who'd been on container ships he said that in his view his previous ship would have gone down in that weather, whereas the *Biscoe* rode through it very well, went through it very well. She was a very well designed ship. She had a round stern which rose on the seas, whereas some ships have a 'V' stern, they tend to sink. Not the ship, the stern rather goes down.

(0:26:13) Tolson: One of the tasks...

Phelps: Ships can ship quite a lot of water over the stern, some ships do and the *Biscoe* didn't .

(0:26:22) Tolson: One of the tasks that all officers , or in fact the officers and crew were all involved was sealing, going sealing. Did you have particular memories of that? Did you enjoy doing that or... ?

Phelps: We did enjoy it because it got us off the ship and it was exercise for everyone, but we didn't actually enjoy killing the seals. I mean nobody could enjoy that but specimens from the seals were taken for scientific research and the rest of the body, carcass fed the huskies. That was the purpose of the operation, so we just did it as a job.

(0:27:03) Tolson: Where did this take place?

Phelps: Well, up the fjords in Marguerite Bay, Laubeuf Fjord, Bigourdan Fjord on the fast ice and sometimes we'd seal with the launch off floes, but that's a trickier operation. It's much better if the seals are in large groups on the fast ice near the ship. The ship could get into the fast ice and the seals were shot and dragged back to the ship and gutted. They were gutted before they were brought aboard the ship. In later years they were gutted on the ship so the scientists could take the specimens more easily and put them in formaldehyde.

(0:27:40) Tolson: They were all taken back to bases?

Phelps: Yes, then we took them back to the bases, unloaded them and I suppose it was a year's supply. They froze during the winter and they hacked them to pieces, the Fids, and fed them to the dogs. I've forgotten how much a dog ate in a day or if they were fed every other day, I can't remember.

(0:28:05) Tolson: Your appointment as Master, did it come as a bit of a shock? How did you react?

Phelps: No, it didn't come as a shock. Obviously it was a challenge and I enjoyed it. But you realise when you become Master that you've got nobody to refer to. You've got a very reliable crew but if you've got a problem and you're standing in the middle of the wheelhouse you always when you're an officer, you go and phone the Master up. He comes up to the bridge but when you become Master you've only got yourself to phone up.

(0:28:47) Tolson: Did you have any great fears as Master? For example, did the weather , severe sort of weather, severe sort of weather faze you?

Phelps: No, not at sea because you've got such a good sea-going vessel but it was on the coast and in the bases, the katabatic winds that were a problem. They could get up from a light breeze to 60, 70, 80 or more knots inside half an hour. Sometimes the ship would get caught in a base, in Borge Bay in Signy for instance, and have to get out. I think that's possibly where some of these passenger ships that are going down there get into trouble. They're not aware of the fact that the weather can change so rapidly. I mean we landed some scientists once and some geologists, I think it was English Strait in the South Sandwich Islands, and I told them to take a pup tent for overnight and the weather changed and by four o'clock we couldn't get them back aboard, so they had to spend the night ashore. They only went ashore for the day and that happened so quickly. It could happen I suppose in the UK but it happens very quickly in the Antarctic.

(0:30:07) Tolson: Do you feel that you had any style of leadership or did you just let things happen and you felt in control?

Phelps: That's a deep question. No, I didn't. I don't think I have any particular leadership qualities, it was just a matter of being Master of the ship and having some very good people working with you, scientists and crew. Everything used to go hunky-dory.

(0:30:42) Tolson: But the important thing being I suppose that people were doing a job that they wanted to do.

Phelps: Yes, yes, yes. As long as everybody does their job and gets on with it, I don't think there's any great leadership qualities required. Of course modern ship Masters a lot of the job is ship management.

(0:31:11) Tolson: The scientific aspect of the *John Biscoe* started in the late '70's with the beginning of the offshore biological programme before the big conversion. What did that teach you from a ship point of view about what might be required in the upcoming refit?

Phelps: Do you mean in terms of equipment?

(0:31:45) Tolson: Equipment yes, and how things might operate.

Phelps: Well I think the equipment was chosen by the scientists mainly. They knew what they wanted. We had an A-frame put on the stern and we had a CTD winch with over 5000 metres of wire on it and we had a big stern winch with horizontal nets and equipment. So the scientists really were behind the requirements.

(0:32:11) Tolson: But before the ship was converted, did you discover in the two years... ?

Phelps: Yes, they attempted to do CTD's without a bow thruster and we couldn't maintain stations so of course the wire drifted out a long way and it didn't work. But we could tow equipment from the derricks but that was very, very difficult. But they saw what they required, it helped them see what was required. I'm a bit vague on that but I don't think it was successful. You couldn't have worked like that for long. I don't think we got any results. I'm sure the scientists didn't get many results from it until 1980 when we had the big refit.

(0:33:07) Tolson: From 1980 you carried on until your retirement in '91 doing some successful marine biological work.

Phelps: Yes, she was very successful once she was equipped for the job. Very successful indeed, considering that she wasn't built as a research ship. She had laboratories and winches (that) worked very well. A little bow thruster. A lovely little ship.

(0:33:36) Tolson: When you look back on BAS now, all these years later, what's the great thing that you miss about BAS in general.

Phelps: Well, the people, they were great people. Everybody, scientists, crew. Still in touch with quite a lot of people but I live down in Devon, so it's off the beaten track. Yes, there's nothing else I miss. I don't actually miss the sea because the sea is..... When I look back at my life the sea is lack of sleep (laughs), watch keeping. I think anybody would say that you look forward to a good night's sleep, forever. Well for the rest of your life you can go to bed and nobody is going to wake you up in the middle of the night, two o'clock in the morning a loud klaxon and telephone going. Klaxon-like telephone we had.

(0:34:39) Tolson: When you look back on your entire career in BAS and FIDS, what personalities, who comes to mind? Any particular people, whether it's Fids or crew?

Phelps: Oh, both, both. I won't mention any names but lots of them, lots of them.

ENDS.

Items of possible interest:

(0:05:10) : Sinking the ship's scow.

(0:06:40) : The happy and relaxed atmosphere of the Biscoe.

(0:11:00) : Practical joke of placing the noisiest husky outside the door of the Chief engineer's cabin.

(0:16:30) : Transfer from launch and scow to 'Gemini' inflatables for landing people and equipment results in much more efficient and safer operations.

(0:25:30) : Superior sea-keeping qualities of the Biscoe partly because of its rounded stern.

(0:30:07) : Modest and self-effacing style of leadership based on full appreciation of and cooperation with crew.

