

BEN HODGES

Transcript of interview with Ben Hodges conducted by Chris Eldon Lee at Ben's home in Sheffield, Yorkshire on 1st August 2009.

DISC 1 *Track marks every five minutes*

Track	Time	Text
1	00.00	<p>My full name is Ben Hodges. I was christened Ben; my father was Benjamin. I was born in Sheffield in 1936, 15th July. <i>So you are now....? 73. Tell me about your life before the Antarctic. What were you up to?</i> Well before Antarctica: I did not even know where Antarctica was. It never cropped up in my vocabulary or of other people that I spoke to. But when I reached 18 years of age there was conscription. I had to do National Service. This I quite enjoyed. I did training at Catterick for a few months and was then flown out to the Canal Zone; I then spent the rest of the time escaping from the Canal Zone, with one or two enemies chasing us, you know. <i>Panama or Suez?</i> Suez. We finished up being driven out to a place near Tobruk and then flown across to Cyprus and then for some reason, I don't know why (it was a troop: only maybe thirty or forty men) we were flown across to Amman because we could go from Amman quite safely, and we went into Syria, then traversed to Baghdad from where we flew back to the UK and the end of our service. But it was quite hairy. We never fired a shot in anger but we were at one stage being faced by Syrian tanks when we crossed the Syrian border, and we were digging in as we moved along. <i>Did you at any time fear for your life?</i> No, I don't think so. I had never been fired at, never been shot at, but the Arabs have a strange reputation for that kind of warfare. Yes, I never had to fire a shot in anger but I could have, as that was what we were trained to do. <i>There was a lot of posturing going on?</i> Yes. The tanks looked very aggressive but nothing happened, so we could move on. <i>And how did you get out of the army? Your time was up?</i> Yes, my two years finished; a little bit over two years when I got back to the UK. <i>Did you have any plans at that point?</i> No, other than go back home and see what was on the go, on the cards. I then found scaffolding quite interesting, so for a couple of years I was a scaffolder – quite high-rise stuff – and then steel erecting came along. I had been taught to do a bit of welding and was installing overhead electric cranes in the workshops in Sheffield. Then steel erecting fizzled out; I was getting a bit fed up with it. Then I saw an advert for steeplejacks. In those days, in the '50s, there was a building trades newspaper, which used to come out once a week, called "Construction News" and I saw this little advert "Steeplejack wanted: phone so-and-so". So I went along with that; I was a steeplejack for maybe eighteen months, no more than that. <i>What was it about the sky that was attracting you?</i> I saw this advert in "Construction News" saying that an organisation down in London wanted two steel erectors, to spend the summer season building a small aircraft hangar at one of the bases. So I thought "That sounds interesting". When I got home I looked in the atlas to see where Antarctica was. I thought: all that way and get paid too! I went down for an interview at the Crown Agents, in London. I remember being interviewed by Bill Sloman (who is no longer with us) and he said "You know it does snow a lot down in Antarctica. What happens when you have got so far with the building of it and the thing gets covered with snow?"</p>
2	00.05	<p>So I said "Well we would just have to dig it out, and pick it up from there". So he said "But what if it happens again, say a week later?" I replied: "If</p>

we've got to build a hangar, we would have to do the same thing again: dig it out and carry on." And he asked me that three times. I thought "As long as I can shovel snow, he is prepared to give me a job!" *And the fact that you weren't going to give up.* No, I really wanted to go, and I hadn't known there was another steel erector there yet. They had got a guy who had just worked on one of the bridges in New Zealand, and he was first-rate, first class, and he taught me an awful lot. He was only going to stay for the summer season. I had heard about husky dog teams further south and so I said "Well, could I stay the winter? I could get a bit more done before the snows come and I can perhaps make an early start next season if you send another steel erector down." because I wanted to go further south and sample what happened in the dog team area. And that's what actually happened. I stayed the winter at Deception. I did get a little bit more done. The other steel erector went home at the end of that summer season (that was it for him) and I got moved down. I said "The hangar's finished now" because I had put some extra bits in, which I could handle on my own, with some help from base. *At Deception?* At Deception, yes. *You talked them into letting you go further south?* That's right. I wintered at Deception as well and I think that put me in good stead for going further south. I finished up at Stonington. *Let's go back to the steel erecting and the steeplejack work. What was it that attracted you to that kind of thing?* As a scaffolder you worked up the side of a building, which was easy. You worked in a team of two or three, pulling all the scaffold poles up and erecting them and just building the building. Then I saw the steel erecting job and I thought I would have a bash at that. That was OK and then in this "Construction News" newspaper there was this advert for steel erectors: two steel erectors wanted in Antarctica. *You were keen to travel, were you?* Yes, I was. I was "footloose and fancy free". I wasn't leaving a girlfriend or anything like that. I knew that my Mum and Dad would be a bit worried about this kind of thing, but I was an adult and had worked with real men. So that's how I was asked to come and be interviewed, at the Crown Agents in London, by Bill Sloman. *When you looked on the map and discovered where the Antarctic was, did it make you more enthusiastic?* Oh, yes, it did indeed. I knew there was a North Pole and a South Pole but when you see the continent off the tip of South America, you think: Yes! *Had you read about Scott and Amundsen?* No, not then. I've read about those guys later. *Shackleton?* Shackleton and Ross, yes. I spent some time at South Georgia as well. *We will come to that in due course. So you arrived at Deception in the autumn of 1960 or 61?* 1960. I sailed from Southampton on the very small ship, the "RRS Shackleton" I think it was. Very small, with a crew of about six, and three – myself and two other chaps – were going down to join the Survey. They had been selected, and the other steel erector he came as well. *What was his name?* Pete Secker. *Are you still in touch?* No. That was the last I heard of Pete: when he left and I went south. We sailed and on the way down we called at Tristan da Cunha. We picked up two Tristan da Cunhans who we were going to take to Port Stanley, to work there. From there, we went down to the base. *What kind of sailor were you?* Terrible sailor. It must have taken me ten days to get my sea-legs. And they said "Who's that?"

3 00.10 "Who's that chap that's just turned up?" I was very sick; I had never been at sea before. I had been in aeroplanes but never at sea, and it did take its toll for that first week to ten days, but I had beaten it by then. *And you were committed of course?* Oh yes, of course. *So you are the sort of guy who would not back out?* I would certainly have liked to escape from the sea-sickness – it was awful – but I would not have backed out, no. *I presume you called at Stanley?* Yes always;

we called at Montevideo as well. Tristan da Cunha was a real bonus; but the Chief Steward always re-victualled at Montevideo. Topped up the ship with fresh fruit. He knew where to go to buy that kind of stuff. He always had a few beers in his 'den'. BAS personnel started to take more and more alcohol South and that got a bit frowned upon. Because people got drunk. *Who was frowning?* The Establishment. Because it would have been reported back, either by the Captain etc., that three of these guys had bought crates of whisky and a dozen parcels of beer, so the Survey put a bit of a block on that. They rationed what you could take. *So they were buying booze in Montevideo to take to their bases?* Yes, that's right. Buying it from the Purser. *And was it Fuchs who found out about that?* I don't know; it would be someone back in London. They said you could only take so much: two bottles of whisky (but there was always a little whisky on base, and beer, for Midwinters Day). When they realised that fellows were getting pretty 'kaylied' they put a stop to that. *So you got to Port Stanley, in the Falklands?* We got all the polar kit then. Part of it was ex-army stuff. Thick shirts, underwear (long johns). Ventile, which is very good for keeping the wind out. When it gets wet, the weave swells and keeps the moisture out as well. So we got all that gear, for whichever base you were going to. We would probably be in Stanley for about a week. *And then they sent you off to Deception?* Yes. *What was your first impression?* Excitement. I was really excited! It was the summer season. A lot of the snow was gone. Deception Island is just a horseshoe ring with two volcano calderas. One was the Whalers' Bay which was the small one that erupted years and years ago and the other one was Port Foster. Neptune's Bellows was the entrance to this magic island. If you could sail all the way round you would be faced with ice cliffs and a few glaciers and rock faces but the Bellows, with a wrecked whale catcher run aground in one side some years ago that was on this ledge partially exposed, we sailed into Whalers' Bay. The Norwegians ran a whaling station there – a shore station – for about eleven years I think before they moved out. *This was your first sight of what was going to be home?* Yes, it was. *And were you impressed, or surprised?* I was pleased, quite pleased; it was still an adventure. We had to get the hangar done so we dug in and worked hard. *Tell me about the hangar. Were you building it from scratch?* It had been prefabricated in the UK and it was just like a jigsaw puzzle to put together. It was not sheeted; there were no sheets to cover it (that was what was wanted). They followed down the year after that, and they sent a couple of sheeters down to sheet it up. *So you were building the skeleton, you and Pete?* Yes, that's right. Pete went and I finished some other bits off

4 00.15 which one man could manage with a chain block and with help from base as well. *Was it hard work, straightforward?* Well, I slipped a disc during that period, and I got laid up. I was actually sent back to Stanley to sleep it off, so to speak, which was a big blow to me but it gradually got better and better, and I did manage to persuade the Survey to give me another chance to go down to Deception and see what happens, and that was fine. *So how long were you away for?* It must have been two or three months, while the ships were still going backward and forwards. No, it wasn't as long as that. One to two months. *So were you in hospital in Stanley?* Yes, I was. *What was that like in those days?* It was a small cottage hospital, I forget the name of it, but it was fine. About six to a ward; they were mixed wards as well which was a bit embarrassing. *Did you feel it was as competent as your own place?* Yes. The nurses were attentive, and the doctor came round and said "How are you feeling now? Let's see what you can do." In the end, I just got up and walked. *You didn't discharge yourself, did you?* No. I was allowed to go back to Deception.

Who did you have to persuade, to be allowed to go back? In Stanley they had a BAS Office, with one or two ex-fids who were now part of the management. Permission was through the management back to London. *And when you got back to Deception, after your lay-off?* Pete had gone; he went home on the ship that season I came out of Antarctica. *What was the state of the hangar?* It was just a skeleton then. It was going to be a skeleton anyway, because there was no sheeting for it. *Was it a complete skeleton?* Yes, it was. It could not be used. *How many aircraft was it designed for?* Two, I think. Two de Havilland Otters. *So it remained in a skeletal state all winter?* It is still in fine shape now, just as a skeleton. I came South quite a few times – South Georgia and places like that. I went down with an American friend. We were doing a survey of South Georgia to try to ascertain how much weight of ferrous and non-ferrous was scrap to be offered to an international scrap dealer, to clear the site, to take all that stuff away for nothing, and leave a clean field site, but that never happened. *This was a chap called..?* Dan Weinstein. We became good friends, actually. *This was a bit later on in the story. So at some point you could not do any more skilled work because it would be too cold.* Yes. All the little bits and pieces were finished. The doors on the hangar were sliding doors, big doors but they could be built and put up with a block and tackle. They were fitted so they could close and open. And then it was just waiting for the sheets. *What did you do in the winter when you could not do any more hangar work?* Well, they retired old dogs from the sledging bases to Deception, so there were always a few dogs on base. They were a bit unruly and we were all new guys there. But John Killingbeck, who was a very good friend of mine, the base leader or base commander (we always called them base leaders) – we tried very hard with the dogs. We actually took them round the edge of the island, all the way round. We dropped over to meet with the Argentinians, and then travelled round what snow was there on the edge, round to meet the Chileans, then back round to Whalers Bay, the entrance, and were boated back across. The sea ice had gone out.

5 00.20 We were boated across, back to Deception. *With the dogs?* Yes. *So you took to the dogs?* Yes, very much so. Particularly when I got my own team, when I went to Stonington. *So here you were at Deception in the middle of winter with no real work to be done. Did the dogs occupy all your time?* No, not all the time. We would take them out for exercise, for runs, and try to lay in a seal stock as well. Because we used to kill seal for dog food. And we used to eat some of the seal meat as well. We did not get very far at Deception. You could venture on to the sea ice if you were careful, once you knew it was fairly solid, but we did not have a good leader, not like the “professional” dog teams. The dogs were really old, a bit rheumatic. But you did what you could. Sometimes you would have to leave them, which was a bit frowned upon. *Did you ever get bored?* No, I don’t think so. We had plenty to read, a nice library. The pilots stayed there that winter. They weren’t flying anywhere. They were good company. Two pilots and two mechanics. Yes, it was good. *And then spring came along. What was the job next spring?* I said to BAS: “All the steelwork is finished. What do you want now?” (I did ask permission to go south.) I said: “What you should do now is to send down a couple of sheeters, and the sheets, to clad it.” And that’s how it was. It is clad now. It is a fine structure even now. That friend of mine, Dan Weinstein, he was a pilot. He was flying contractors down in his own plane, down to Adelaide Island, which is near Stonington Island, to build a runway at Rothera base. He was taking the contractors in and out from Punta Arenas. He did like going to Antarctica. *You persuaded them to let you go to Stonington?* I did. *Do you know how that came about?* I wanted to go to a dog-sledging base, and

Stonington seemed to be the one. You had contact with the mainland as well: the Peninsula. *Did you have to persuade anyone in particular?* I don't remember having to do that. It was Stonington, for the dogs, to become a dog driver. *So you had gone down as a steel erector, and you became a fully fledged fid.* I think we were BAS then; it changed from the Falkland Island Dependencies Survey (FIDS) to British Antarctic Survey (BAS). *Was it your ambition to become more versatile in the Antarctic work?* No, I was quite happy to be a dog driver. That suited me fine. You inherit the dog teams from the guys that are going home. You might have only ten days or a fortnight to unload all the ship, to re-victual the base, and at the same time if you are going to be a dog handler, you are introduced to one of the drivers. He will take you out with the dogs as many times as you can in this ten-day activity, so you can see how the dogs are commanded, left and right, how they are encouraged along, how to harness them, how to make sure they are not going to fight. This is almost an impossibility; they always fight at some stage. You will learn the language, for turning them, stopping them, setting them off. It is up to you then; that is your team. *So does every dog team have the same set of instructions or does it vary from team to team?* They are always the same commands. My dog team was called the Moomins. The nucleus of that was from two chaps from base who wanted to see this penguin rookery somewhere out in the bay.

6 00.25 Emperors, which is unusual at that latitude. This happened before. They set off to go and find this island. The weather blew up, the cloud came in, and it was all clagged out. They had set off, gone on to the sea ice, and it blew, for about forty eight hours I believe. And then, when it cleared, the sea ice had gone out. It had all broken away, and these two teams were on the sea ice. They were never found, but what happened over the next month or two was that the odd dog or a pair of dogs, drifted back on ice floes, as the floes came back to the beach. Three of those dogs were the nucleus of the Moomins. This happened before I went down. They formed the Moomins from the escapees from the sea ice break up. *So who did you inherit the Moomins from?* I cannot remember his name. *What was that process like? Was it a delicate process or were you just thrown in at the deep end? Were you nurtured?* You go out with him as many times as you can in the ten days of the ship relieving the base. So he can teach you the words, show you how to stop them fighting, when they start to fight (because they will always fight). The leader was a bitch. Dot. She was a beautiful dog and a tremendously good leader. In the end I could turn just a few degrees by how loud I shouted to her. The terms were "Irrha" for left and "Auk" for right, and if I whispered it, she would just move a degree to the side. It was amazing. But if I gave her a good shout, she would go well to the left or well to the right. *Where did the words come from. Was it eskimo?* I think it was from the Inuit language, though I never did find out. I used to go out as often as I could, even when the ship left. Because you have to train. You have to be in control. You have to know how to harness them – make sure the harness is going to be a nice tight fit. Because you can lose them down a crevasse, which did happen. And the dogs get to know you. They get to know what they cannot do. Because you have to wade into a fight, or you get an injured dog, and you lose one of your power unit, and you carry him on the sledge, putting another 90lb on the sledge. So you try to separate them as quickly as possible, shouting and swearing. You have a 'thumper', which sounds a bit cruel; it is a one-inch manila rope which is back-spliced, in a loop, bound up at the end and that hangs on the handlebar, the vertical handlebar. If they fight, you have to get in amongst them, kicking and beating the aggressors, and making them all settle

down. *Was that a case of showing them who was boss?* Yes. That's how it was put over to us. You have got to make those dogs do what you want to do. It does work in the end. *They don't build up any resentment?* No. If Dot was on heat, and she stopped for a pee quickly, and you could not get the other dogs past it, there would be one big pile up, a big fight, where she stopped. That was a real bundle. You have to get in, shouting. We had moccasins, Inuit moccasins, and they are quite soft footwear. It's not like kicking them hard with a very heavy boot. *Ten days doesn't seem very long to learn every trick in the trade.* It isn't, no, but you've got to face it and go out yourself then. You don't have to take the whole team, because you cannot manage seven dogs, let alone nine dogs, if you are still learning, so you take three, with a little road round the base – leader and a pair – and then you put another pair on, to take five dogs, and just build it up to what you feel confident with. *Your team, the Moomins, three were from the previous teams....* Yes from that debacle, from the two that were lost on the ice. *Where did the rest come from?*

7 00.30 The Moomins were already there when I got there. There were three dogs that had come back in from the ice. The others were maybe scratch dogs from wherever. *But you inherited an experienced team?* Yes, I did. *So it was you that was learning, not them.* It was me, yes. The driver took me out as often as he could, You would not take the whole team at once. You would take five: the leader and two pairs. You might take another pair later on. You would take a bit of a load up onto the Northeast Glacier, and train up there. *You did lots of miles with dog sledges didn't you?* Yes we had a thousand-mile dog sledge journey over the Peninsula. Up the infamous Sodabread Slope. It is about 7000 feet on the Plateau, and it is a horrendous climb up, and it's a horrendous drop off on the other side, to get onto the ice shelf the other side where we would lay a depot. *Does this also have another name?* Yes, 'Sodomy Slope'! *Tell be about the thousand-mile trip.* That was surveying on the Larsen Ice Shelf. We had to lay a depot at the top of Sodabread Slope, going backwards and forwards with as much gear as the dogs could carry. You have to push. That's [a photo of] repairing the handlebars, when they turned over. There are the Moomins. That's John Killingbeck with the Counties. That's John Cunningham (who is dead now) with the Admirals. And these are the Moomins in '61/'62. I was there in 1960, finished the hangar for the next season, so that's '61; this was on Deception. Then I got down to Stonington. There are the dogs. That is the kind of terrain you are going into. The base is there. This is the Northeast Glacier. The route is: you go up there, head for that Walton Peak, around there and Sodabread is up there. *And these are your own photographs from the early sixties?* Not necessarily. That is John Cunningham. He was killed in a climbing accident (not down there but in England). That is Stonington Island. It was linked; it's not linked now because of global warming. It's all open water now but that ramp was always there when we were there. That took us up to Northeast Glacier and Sodabread, and on to the plateau. *Let's talk more about this 1000-mile trip, because obviously that was significant, because it was your first major trip.* Yes. I went as a dog driver, and a minder to look after the geologists. They were "geologising" all the way up the coast. *That was the purpose of the trip?* Yes, it was a scientific thing. I was not a scientist. I was just one of those that went with them. So that they could get on to the rock face and move along and there was someone there with them. *What was it like, this thousand miles?* You must have been away from base for quite some time. Yes, about three months I think it was. *Two of you?* No, we had three teams, in line. The dogs will always follow another team, and that spared the other dogs too much work; they will follow easily, very easily.

Leading a team, being the leader of the convoy, takes the brunt of the work. He has got to keep his dogs going, whether in soft snow

8 00.35 or icy snow, or whatever. You have got to lead in any conditions. In deep snow, where you are pushing as well as the dogs pulling. *The specimens were going on the back of the sledge and that was making them heavy?* Or we would depot them. We had the de Havilland Otters at Deception, and they would fly in and pick up the samples which were in sledging boxes. *So you are being serviced all the way round?* Yes, as long as the planes can get it, and they know where the depot is. That's how they do it now, I think. They will go in and collect what the geologists have put together, and bring them back to base, and they will analyse them. *Was this the trip where "the incident" occurred?* Yes, on the way back. *Tell me the story. You were almost back home weren't you?* Yes, we came back home, came back down to Three Slice Nunatak, which is straight over the Peninsula from the base, on the other side of the Peninsula at sea level. The route up to the top of the plateau from Three Slice Nunatak is called Bill's Gulch and it is quite heavily crevassed. So you are pushing all your load up Bill's Gulch, watching for crevasses, on to the top. By that time you are ready to camp. So you would be in your pyramid tent. You would camp, eat, sleep, and get off the next day. Then you have got to get to the top of Sodabread, which is on the other side. The Moomins were very good at leading. They were a strong team. I probably led most of the way. All the teams led, in turn, but mine was very strong. *So we are talking about this incident – the near-tragedy.* We were up Bill's Gulch, on top of the plateau, heading towards the top of Sodabread. So we all got to the top of Sodabread, all three teams. It was my turn to lead down. It was soft snow. Having gone up Sodabread, I knew which way down it was. The tracks had gone from when we came up. It's quite a steep curve when you leave the top, then it flattens out a bit and you have to turn to the right to stay away from a big ice cliff, and wander down that way. You have a thick rope round the sledge runners; this acts as a brake, because a loaded sledge will catch the dogs up if the surface is slippery and it could run into them and injure them. I said to the team behind me "Give me ten to fifteen minutes to get to the bottom of this first slope. Take the rope brakes off, which are wrapped round the runners, to stop it overrunning the dogs" I know we had to traverse round the bowl above Sodabread, to start to drop down Sodabread itself, because that's the way we came up. So I took the ropes brakes off, after we had gone over the top, and I set off traversing. The next team came over. They were a fair way behind me. I am travelling along, contouring, trying to get round, the sledge slipping sideways. You have got 'keels' you can put down through the runners which will help that. But we were going sideways, the dogs partially pulling uphill, going forward at an angle. Then, all of a sudden, Dot disappeared. *Did you know there were crevasses around?* Yes, but I did not know where they were. It was semi-whiteout. If the visibility is good you can see where the snow bridge might be hollow – it might be sinking. But I did not see this because it was semi-whiteout, the sky merging with the ground, So suddenly Dot disappeared. Then the pair behind her disappeared as well. Then – zip, zip – they all went down. *All nine?* I think I had seven at that stage, after the long journey. The sledge was then pointing uphill, and it was almost

9 00.40 on the edge of the crevasse, almost at right angles, not running with it, because the sledge has been slipping down the slope at the same time. So I pulled the sledge over and shouted to the guy I was with "Pull it over and make sure

it's not going to slide." And we pulled it over so it could not drag. I crawled to the end of the trace and I looked down. I thought they had all gone. My eyes got used to it and there they all were hanging in their harnesses. We make our own harnesses from lampwick. We make them a snug and strong fit, so they don't fall out. They were all hanging in mid air. The other teams were following in my tracks by now. So I shouted to them. "Come down from above. Take your load off. Picket the dogs. Push the sledge over the crevasse, and I will go down and pull them out one at a time." Which I did. *So the sledge formed a bridge?* Yes, right above where the trace disappeared. They lowered me down on a rope tied once round the sledge. I did not have any jumar stirrups. *You volunteered, did you?* Oh yes, I had to do the business. It wasn't bravery or anything; I was just desperate to get the dogs out. Two of them were fighting – in mid-air! I got down to the back pair. I said "Send me a rope down, with a karabiner on, and I will clip it on a harness, take one off, pull her up, and keep repeating". Before we got this bridge set up, I kept looking down. There were two fighting, and when I looked a second or third time, they had disappeared. They had actually fallen out of their harnesses. *They had wriggled out?* Pulled each other out, I suppose. I thought "Well, they've gone". I could almost see Dot but not these other two. It was McGraw and another dog I cannot remember). They dropped me down and pulled each dog out in turn, I clipped them on. I got down to Dot and said "Dot you've fallen the farthest". Then I looked down and there was a big block of ice wedged in the crevasse and on this ice which had soft snow on the top were the two that had fallen out. They were not fighting any more. They were lying quietly there. I thought "I am going to get them all". I went down to them, one was called Eccles. He was a big dog. I put a harness on his two front legs and a harness on his two back legs, put them both together, and he went up with his back hollow, because he would have fallen out. We got them all up like that. *So how far down was the deepest dog?* The length of the trace plus another twenty feet, 30 ft, 40ft, 50ft; it's just a wild guess. *You spoke to the dogs?* They were all quiet, hanging in their harness. Eccles and the other dog were lying quietly, not fighting. We sent each dog up singly and they were all pulled out. Because I did not have jumar stirrups (I think I had crampons on), the guys at the top gradually hauled me up. *Did you think you were being brave?* No, I was not frightened at all. It had to be done.

10 00.45 *What was the mood of the dogs like when you got them back up again?* They were quiet. We took the sledge bridge away. I forget whose sledge it was. They took the sledge back to where they had picketed the dogs and loaded the sledge up. In the mean time I had got mine back away from the crevasse and picketed, all the load tied on safely, then harnessed the dogs up, and waited until everybody was ready. *So you were back on the road quite quickly?* I didn't cross any more crevasses. I didn't see any more crevasses. I didn't see that one the team fell in. *You were home the same evening?* Yes, we were. We did not have to camp. *In your bunk that night, thinking back over the day, did you have a different view on it all? Did you realise you were lucky, or unlucky?* I was lucky. It could have happened to anyone. I was mightily relieved. The Moomins led all the way back. They were a good team. I was lucky to have a team like that. *And they were lucky to have you?* Yes, I was enthusiastic and I did love the dogs. I cried buckets when I left. They were on the spans and it was very tearful saying goodbye to them all. We raised pups as well. A bitch could come on heat, and you have to breed a few young pups to grow up and take the place of the old timers when they get too arthritic. *They did in fact perish eventually, didn't they?* Yes they did. That team and another team I cannot remember

the name of, and two men. That was the year after I left, 1965/66. *Where were you when you heard about that?* I was at home. *In Yorkshire?* Yes I had come home. I cannot remember who told me. *What was your feeling?* It was dreadful. After a long search the two men were found. One was in a snow hole dug behind the sledge. He was standing, apparently frozen to death, in the attitude of calling for his mate who was going out to see how the dogs were faring. *The Moomins?* No there were two teams. The dogs curl up, go to sleep, and they can freeze to the ice. Then they cannot get up and if they get covered, they are suffocated. That can happen, and that is what happened to the two teams, and the two men. One body was found between the snow hole and the dogs. He never made it to the dogs. The dogs were frozen and suffocated and buried. The guy in the snow hole was shouting to his mate, in blizzard conditions. *Were you very upset by the loss of the dogs?* Yes I was. *Did the loss of the men mean more to you?* I did not know the men at all, but losing the men and losing the dog team was traumatic. I would not put the loss of the dogs before the men. It was a horrible thing to happen. But they will keep curled up in a blizzard, and they can freeze even though they have very thick coats. They will generate warmth but then they will get cold and will not be able to stand up. *What were the other highlights of your time at Stonington?* It was mainly sledging really. Going out onto the sea ice during good weather, to bring in the seals which were lying there, for the dog feed during the winter. You stun a seal, you cut its throat, cut it open, pull all the giblets out.

11 00.50 Then you turn it on its back, put a hole through its jaw and you tow it back to base to put on the seal pile. On the seal pile you would split it into three: each side of the spine and then you have got three nice long lengths of meat to chop up for the twice-weekly feed. *For the dogs; and the humans?* We used to take a little; we had a heart at some time. I'm not sure whether we had a liver. We always took a nice piece out of the back for whoever was cooking. It was OK – it was fine. *How did you feel about doing it? Because it was not exactly in the job description for a steel erector to have to start dismembering seals.* You picked it up from the guys who were there. *But you took to it quite well?* Oh yes. You would stun the seal. When you get to them they do rear up a bit, frightened, and you could do with the flat blade of your ice axe at the top. Not the pick side. You could stun it and then cut the throat and let it bleed. Cut the windpipe, then you would slice it down and pull all the intestines out, and leave them on the ice. Then you would drag it back to base. *So you were not queasy about any of that?* I never liked it. I did not enjoy killing seals. It is a bloody mess. But that was what you did for the dogs. I was still having a problem with a slipped disc, every now and again. It was quite painful. I did manage but it did ache quite a bit, at Signy. *Is that what made you come back, the slipped disc?* I was “cas-evac’ed” out. I lay in Stanley hospital towards the end, waiting for transport back home, which in the end was a Norwegian ship, which had brought passengers down and cargo. I came all the way back on there. I was met in Southampton and taken into Southampton hospital. I had a plaster cast put on. Then they drove me back home, and left me. *So what happened then? There is a big gap in your Antarctic career from 1966 to 1990. How did you fill those years? Did you recover?* I met my wife. I was going for physiotherapy and my wife is a physiotherapist. *Is that how you met her?* Yes. *She was treating you? Kathy?* Not Kathy all the time, because there was quite a big school. We got to know each other quite well. I got better, and I got a job with a seismic company, doing seismic survey in the North Sea, with detonators and putting a pattern of waves down into the sea bed. That paid very good money, once I got fit. It was not heavy work. *Were you doing that for all this time, twenty odd years?* No, I

only did it for three or four years. I never got onto a rig. I wanted to do that. I had been offered a job on a rig. So I told the seismic survey company SSL that I was going to leave and go on a rig. But they said “What about going down to West Africa for us? With a recording boat and a catamaran for setting the charges off.” That sounded interesting. So I went to the Cameroons and did a survey there, on the explosives side. I was there for about two months. Kathy and I were writing to each other and she said there was a chance she could go to South Africa to work. But I said that I would be coming back in about a month’s time, and so she waited. I was cured by then, obviously. *What other kind of work did you do in the interim?* I got better by taking on some light jobs, making fibreglass bin liners from a mould.

12 00.55 I went to work for two brothers and they showed me how to lay these up. It was light work, and I gradually got better. I left there and went for the ratcatcher’s job in Sheffield. I told them I had had a slipped disc problem years ago, but was fine now. But the council said, with all the manhole covers you would have to lift off to poison the rats, we cannot offer you the job. *Can you mention of few highlights from the years before you went back to the Antarctic?* It was on the seismic boat on the North Sea. *That was the main work?* Yes. I was earning very very good money and on one of the periods of leave, in Sheffield, I bought a brand new Triumph Spitfire straight out of the showroom. Kathy and I went round the Ring of Kerry for a holiday in Ireland. *What was it that tempted you to go back to the Antarctic?* We went to the Royal Geographical Society and I got talking to a chap I had never met before, but he was from BAS and he started talking about Halley Bay. It was a jackable platform and the snow builds up over the winter. Then you jack it up again to keep it clear underneath. The old huts that were fixed to the snow, they would get buried slowly and then they would be crushed, so when you are jacking a platform up, you are beating that. You put extensions on the legs: twenty legs, twenty steel stanchions. You have two men on every stanchion, and you are jacking these things on a worm wheel ever so slowly. *So you went to Halley for just a couple of months in early 1990 to do that kind of work?* Yes I did. *And you were back again the following summer?* I went there at least three times. We could drive Sno-cats as well, if they were short of Sno-cat drivers, unloading the ship, and taking all the cargo inland to the base, which was quite a distance. *At one point you were sleeping in a tent at the base?* Yes, it was covered over with snow. We were cooking too – Al Wearden was the cook – and we were living below the snow level, at Halley. *Underneath the ground?* Well the snow would accumulate, and it would blow and cover, but we were not buried as such. You could climb out at either end, up a hatch. *There was a famous trip, or infamous, called K16. Tell me about that.* K16, going back to the ship? That was hilarious. *Tell me the story.* We had all finished at Halley Bay. All the cargo which was going to the ship was going. We had a Sno-cat, I think there were half a dozen of us, and we had a case of beer. We were having a great time. We had finished. It had been hard work, a hard season, and we had a few cans of beer on the way to the ship. The first mate saw us. You are supposed to drive with the hatch open, in case you were to fall in a crack. We had not done that. We just jumped out on the sea ice when we got to the end. He said “Are you all having a death wish?” That was K16, the last Sno-cat back that season. *Were you conscious of “Health & Safety”?* You have got to be sensible about it. I like to think I am sensible, but it can get a bit of a nuisance.

13 01.00 Being a steeplejack you have got to do it right. Being a steel erector you have got to do it right. You have got to know you are not going to fall off,

I have never really been frightened of that. *But your background was hugely methodical?* As a scaffolder, and particularly with the steeplejacking. It wasn't steeples, it was industrial chimneys. You have to put your own pegs in and your own ladders. That is a bit of an eye-opener. You get used to it. When you get to the top, there are usually steel bands all the way round the top ten feet. If you have got to maintain any stonework or bricks at the top, you have to pull this one inch diameter ironwork. You pull from a pulley block to the guy down below. He pulls them up. They have got a ring and are the width of a chimney at the top. *Two metres.* You hook these over and to get enough of those round to go down in a bosun's chair, and inspect all the mortar and repair it. You have to stand on the bands from your ladders that you have put in. The bands are only half an inch thick. You stand holding on to the hangers. You are pushing them forward and you are shuffling round on these bands until you get where you want to be. Put a bosun's chair on, sit on it, and you lower yourself down and examine what's what. You do what needs to be done. *So would you say you were more health-and-safety conscious in the Antarctic than your colleagues, because of your careful background?* No, I just enjoyed what I did. I was conscious about falling in a tidecrack, or putting a leg into a crevasse. *Were you a risk taker?* I was probably a bit inclined that way, yes. *And you got away with it?* Yes, though the dog team falling down the crevasse, that was traumatic. I did not see that coming. It was semi-whiteout conditions; you don't have a horizon at all.

DISC 2

1 00.00 *We were talking during the tea break about the relationship between men and dogs. You felt a very strong connection with your dogs?* I did indeed. *Can you describe it? What does bind dog and man together?* For me, the welcome that the dogs give you when you go down to the spans is amazing. They just want to love you. They are chained up all the time on base. You can't let them go; they would foul everywhere and they would fight. They have to be chained on the span. They can move in a diameter from a central picket. They are fed with seal meat. The welcome, the tail-wagging, the fuss that they make; for me it was marvellous. *Was that just for you?* Because you are bringing meat? No. You could not bring anything and you would always get a welcome. *So it was a relationship between two personalities, you and the team?* Having a welcome like that. They were not cowed at all. They were absolutely marvellous. When I said goodbye to each one I left Dot to the last. I sat and wondered. *Do you think she knew that you were leaving?* I don't know. She gave me a welcome. She was very shy, very petite and wriggled a little bit. That was always there. And I was always welcomed. I think every driver was welcomed in that way. *When you went down the crevasse to rescue them, was it because they were a useful resource or was it because they were your friends?* They had to be rescued whether I had to carry them down the glacier one at a time. *Why did they have to be rescued?* They are friends, and companions. You don't desert them. If there was a man in a crevasse, ten feet away from the crevasse that the dogs were in, I would have to pay attention to the man. But I would be on tenterhooks about the dogs. I would have to get the dogs back. You would have to get your colleagues back, for sure, and the way my colleagues responded to what needed to be done, was amazing. *Team working?* Yes, the effort that they put in. I was definitely going to be the one that went down and sent them up one at a time. That had to be my role. I was not frightened at all, just scared of losing them. *Were you a bit puzzled about the Polar*

Medal for that? I did not know it was for that. I found out about the Polar Medal quite a long time after leaving the Survey (BAS) to work on the North Sea, on the seismic boats. We came ashore at Grimsby. You have half an hour at Grimsby, reloading victuals etc., and there was a letter for me. I think it was in a brown paper envelope and I opened it. It was from the Ministry of Defence, saying that I had been awarded the Polar Medal. That puzzled me. When I got back to Sheffield I went into the Reference Library and said

2 00.05 “Look, I have been sent this. Do you think I should accept?”
Can you believe that? *How did they react at the Reference Library?* “Of course, you must.” *Did you know them? Were they friends?* No. I just wanted some backup. Was I doing the right thing? It was in the November investitures, and there were a lot of people receiving awards: knighthoods, the lot. You are all queueing in an ante-room. It is in a room where there is a gallery, and a band on the gallery, at Buckingham Palace. When you get to the entrance, you stand there and wait to be called in. Everyone that goes in, the band strikes up a tune for them. You have got to turn; you have got to bow. You take steps forward and then you bow when you get to the Queen. She’s on a dais. A small lady, in green. She was on a platform that high. When you are coming down the ante-chamber, before you go into the proper building, they have pinned a hook on. Because obviously she cannot be pinning medals on. A beefeater comes up then with a cushion, and on it is your medal. And she pins it on and she says “And what are you doing now Mr Hodges?” (She probably says that to everyone). You just say what comes into your head. I did say I was working on the North Sea with a seismic company. She said “That must be very interesting.” You know you are dismissed then. You don’t turn round; you don’t turn your back on her. You walk back, you step backwards, and then you bow. You walk back three more steps, turn to the right and away you go off. The band strikes up a tune for everybody. *What was your tune?* I can’t remember. You can take two guests. I took Kathy (we had talked about marriage, after we bought that Triumph Spitfire straight from the showroom) and my Mum. *They were in the room at the time?* They were only three rows back from the front, and it is quite a big room. I was thrilled to bits to see them that close. *So when did you find out why you got the Polar Medal?* I have never found out why. I haven’t a clue why. There is nothing mentioned. *So you were surprised to get it?* When I opened that letter, we were sitting on the quayside and we had been brought the mail. I opened the letter and I thought “What’s this?” It just did not register, the honour or pleasure or whatever. *How do you feel about it?* I am quite proud of it. I am quite happy to talk about it. There are many more deserving people than me but perhaps there is a bracket of people who can receive the Polar Medal for what they might have done or might not have done. *You think you were part of a quota?* I think so, yes. But it is quite an honour, it really is. I got the Fuchs medal as well. Do you know about the Fuchs Medal? *Tell me.* It was at a BAS Club Reunion in the Lake District. You went up and had lots of beers, and there was lots of grub. They announced that we have Ben Hodges here, who is going to receive a Fuchs Medal. I did not know this was going to happen. They clapped and out came someone from the Survey whose name I can’t just think of. He came up with this in his hand and

3 00.10 said we would like to present you with the Fuchs Medal but there has been a delay, from the Mint. So you will have to have a substitute. It was a flattened beer can or something like that, on a string. It was hilarious. *But it was genuine.* They had not minted it in time. What happened then was that I was called to

Cambridge, to receive the Fuchs Medal. Sir Vivian was there and all the management were there. I brought the other medal down with me, the beer can lid. Kathy was there. When Sir Vivian used to present the medal, he would finish up by saying to the person who was in the group "This is the medal Fred gives, come and get it." He said that to me and I walked out. He had got the proper medal and he pinned that on. I said "Well Sir Vivian, I did receive another one from the Survey and I have got it here. I would like to present that to my wife. Would that be all right?" He said "Yes of course it will." So I said "OK, Kathy. Come and get it." A lot must have known that it wasn't a Polar Medal. They must have thought "Two Polar Medals?" I bet they did. I did not hear anything about that in the end. So she came up and I put it round her neck. It was lovely. He was a lovely man. We went back for dinner with him at home. He took us back to his house, with his wife and with one of the staff (I forget the lady's name). It was a lovely interlude. You could see he was getting a bit tired. *This was in 1996.* We went from the dining room into the little sitting room, and he was pulling out all the medals and things he had been awarded and showing them. It was lovely. It was not long after that when he died. I was the last recipient that received the medal from him; I am pretty certain of that. *The medal – is it his gift or is it voted on?* It is voted on. That is by your peers. I did this for Al, when we were sailing South. You get a list of people and if you can show someone is worthy within the people that you mix with. That is what I was told. I don't know how I came about getting it. I think it must be the same way, from someone. *Do you think it is partly due to the fact that you spent so many years...?* It could be. *Your service spans four decades.* Yes, and perhaps it's time to get rid of him, give him a medal. *So you have a Polar Medal and a Fuchs Medal.* Yes. If I knew where they were, I could show you. *Let's flip back a bit. I would like to get some details from you about the early days, back at Deception. When you were building this hangar, erecting the steel, how did you know where to put everything, where to put the posts? Was there any survey?* Yes, there was a surveyor there when we put the foundation boxes in. They were about that square, on plinths. We dug the holes out, they were measured, squared off. We put a box in each one that we cast concrete on, because you want the level top. It is a concrete cube in each column's base. *You were doing that as well?* Yes. They are bolted down there as well. We had a surveyor there with us, and Pete Secker was very good. He had been working on the Auckland Harbour Bridge when he saw an advert in "Construction News", this weekly newsletter for the building trades. *So he had come from New Zealand?*

4 00.15 He was not a New Zealander. But he had been to New Zealand. He had come back to the UK and was looking through the jobs in "Construction News" and saw that. He definitely wanted to go home at the end of that summer season. He said "This is not for me. It has been great, but...". I said "Can I stay?" even after the slipped disc. I said "I can get better. I can ease up." and it worked for me, but Pete went. *When you put your dog team together, some of the veterans and one or two the new ones, you were working with a chap called John Killingbeck. John Killingbeck, a fine man, the base leader. At Deception. Tell me a bit more about him.* He is a lovely man, well educated. A gentleman, a splendid man. He will tackle anything. We were good friends. They used to retire dogs, old beat-up dogs which were not very good, back to Deception. So they had dogs on the Deception base. We knocked together a five-dog team. We went round the island the best way we could. John would love all that as well, and we did it together. *Was he as mad about dogs as you?* Yes, I think he was. *A natural leader?* Yes. I would follow John Killingbeck

anywhere. I am godfather to two of his lads. *There was an incident when you were going to the Argentinian base with the dogs, you hit a cliff face.* That's right. It was not a cliff face. We went round on as much snow as was there. We wanted to stay in the snow, and it was fairly high up. We just contoured round. Then we got to the end. When you looked over the edge, the Argentinian base was just down in the bottom. It wasn't a thousand foot drop or anything like that. It might have been a hundred and fifty feet. We had to lower the dogs, one at a time. One of us got down below. The other put a dog on and led it down, one at a time. *And going back?* We dropped down into the Argentinian base. We had a lovely time with them. Then we sledged round, the best way you can (if you can find a bit of snow, you go), round to the Chilean base which is in Port Foster as well – it is the big caldera at the end. We stayed with them. We had a very big welcome. The wine comes out, the meat comes out. I am a veggie but ... The meat comes out and everything. We traced it right back to Neptune's Bellows, the best way we could in what snow we could find. It is not like further south. There is not much snow there. We got down to where there is a little lighthouse, that flashes a light through Neptune's Bellows. There was no sea ice then in Whalers' Bay. They fetched us with a dinghy. We had a lovely time. *How were the communications with the Argentinians?* Very very good. You could walk round on the beach, when the tide was down a bit, and they would give you a great welcome. The wine would come out, the beef would come out. *What language?* It would not be Spanish, because neither of us spoke Spanish then. It was English, amongst them. But then, after you had said goodbye, you would expect them to come and visit you, and they do. They enjoyed it with us just the same, and it was the same with the Chileans. But they have got much farther to go. They were not a nuisance. They were always made welcome. They loved to come. *Some people have suggested that the Argentinians did not really like being there very much.* They are not polar heroes, like we Brits might think we are polar heroes. The attitude is not the same. They will stay inside for as long as they can. They will certainly clothe themselves very well if they go out, when it is not really warranted, certainly at Deception. You would not see them in winter. *A bit 'nesh', were they?* Oh aye.

5 00.20 *Let's go forward then to the 1990s and the decision to go back South again after a twenty-year gap. What happened?* We were at the Royal Geographical Society. We had gone for a talk. I think it was for Ran Fiennes' efforts to cross Antarctica. I got talking to a chap called Al Smith. He was a big figure in BAS and the project at Halley Bay was his responsibility. He said "We are building a steel platform and we need steel erectors." I said "I have been a steel erector. I can do that kind of thing." So he said "Do you fancy coming and having a go?" Kathy was there with me and she would have listened to what we said. She knows that if I like to do something and she vets it, it is all right. She was going to be left on her own. He said "Come down and see me at BAS and we will talk it over." So I said "Yes, if you have got a place for steel erectors", and that is how it happened. *Did you have to think twice?* I didn't, no, once it was OK with Kathy. It was the kind of thing she might have expected me to do, and I was allowed to go ahead. They signed me on and down I came. *What differences did you spot after having been away for twenty five years?* I Had never been to Halley Bay before. I had been on the Peninsula mainland whereas this was across the Weddell Sea on that big ice shelf in the bottom corner. It was a new venture, an exciting venture. You have to find a ramp and the ship gets in as close as it can. You are offloading stores and you have got to watch for the ice breaking away. There are Sno-cats waiting to pick all the gear up, and there is

activity. I enjoyed it very much. *But it was very different on the east coast from the west coast?* Yes it is very different at Halley Bay. You have got to get on to the top of the ice shelf there. They usually find a ramp, or they have to lower the cargo over the side of the ship when it is tied up against the ice edge, and everything is dropped on to sledges, attached to Sno-cats. I got a job driving the Sno-cats, backwards and forwards. I loved it – it was great. *Were you re-united with dogs or had that finished by then?* I don't think there were any dogs there then. They used to keep them in tunnels at Halley. They did have dog teams there. I never went out with a dog team there. They were below the ice; they used to hollow out the ice and they kept the dogs there, particularly through the winter. I was only there for the summer. *Tell me more about jacking up the base.* There are twenty stanchion legs down each side, ten on each side. These are built up from channels, with cross-plates so they are nice sturdy legs, channels back to back and there is a jack with two handles on. It operates a screw that goes very very slowly. You have to do them all in unison when you are jacking the platform up or it will twist and rock. You have all got to move it up to the same level. So that is two chaps on every stanchion: ten pairs at one side and ten pairs at the other, simultaneously. I don't know how it was monitored, for going up without twisting it. That was not my scene. I was just there to do the rough work. *That would require forty men, then?* Yes, it is labour intensive. That is why they would never entertain another structure like that.

6 00.25 It is all right if you just switch one on and it jacked it up itself. It would be all right if it worked like that, but it was not like that. It was a German design. *How often would they have to do it?* At the end of every winter – the beginning of every summer. What happens it that the wind scours underneath, accelerates in a venturi. Where it is going in it forms a windscoop which builds up, and where it is flowing out it loses its speed and builds a big dump at the other side. So in the end, although it is scouring the ice underneath, it is building up on both sides. But they have got bulldozers, tractors with big blades on, and they have to spread it out as best they can. But it is hard-packed snow, certainly on the side where it hits the platform first. It forms this big windscoop, and polished ice underneath where it is accelerated through. Then, as it has gone through the structure, the pressure comes off and it is just dumped at the other side. So in the end it is living in a hollow anyway. If it is not groomed, then in a long bad blizzard it could almost be buried. *Did you have to empty the base to raise it up?* No. *Would people be still working inside?* I think they would. The cook would be cooking, etc. You had to put extensions on the legs after so many seasons because the snow build-up is that big. So you would come down with extensions which you would put on. So you would jack through the collar where the extension goes on, and you could raise it up that way. It is on very long columns. *What were the feet standing on?* They had a bed and I think they put them on pallets. I did not see that process, because I did not get down on the first lot of builders. When I was talking to Al Smith about being a steel erector he said we still need steel erectors there. A lot of it was built. The structure on top was not built. It was in the process of building. These were all panels and double glazing. You have to put an extension of the leg, on each one, once the snow is getting too high. Also it is moving. So it can twist and distort. *So you were correcting that every year as well?* Yes. You are supposed to all take it up at the same speed. I was put in charge of one of the shifts. They had brought down with them a dozen Royal Engineers, squaddies. I was given them on my shift. They were buggers. They would jack like mad and then stop. They would not do it so that we kept the whole thing level. They

were really a bad bunch. *This would take several days?* Yes, it was labour intensive. The one they have got now, the new one, which is being built in South Africa, is on telescopic legs. And it is on skids. They can move it. They can groom it so it's level, at the end of the winter season, and they can move it to a level area. It can be sledged around. It is a state-of-the-art structure. *When you were there in '91/'92 it was a short season because you had to come away.* We could not get in one year because of the fast ice. It might have been that year. All we had was about two weeks, to get everything done. Because the ship has to leave by a certain date or it will get trapped in the Weddell Sea. *So you had to readjust the base in two weeks flat?* I think it was three weeks from docking at the ice edge to sailing off. We were all on four or five months pay. It was very generous really.

7 00.30 *So they shipped all these men South, for a few weeks, just to do this job?* I don't know why they put the squaddies on. You have to have forty men. The men who are there on base: everybody has got to chip in and do their bit. *You found yourself aboard the "James Clark Ross" at some point?* A lot of the lads sailed down from Grimsby on the maiden voyage of the "James Clark Ross". I have a black and white photograph taken at Stanley of us all stood at the side of the hull. It was excellent. It has ballast tanks which stop it from rolling. It does not roll all over the place; it counteracts the roll. The ballast is pumped from one side to the other, in the hull. Brand new ship. All mod. cons. *There was a rumour about a sauna of some sort.* Yes there was a sauna, and little gym there too, down in the sauna room, and a bicycle. *Is there a sauna story?* I used to like the saunas. I used to go down to the saunas when they went for the afternoon kip, as everyone did. I would go down and have a big sauna. Then I would get on the bicycle – there was just one – I would get a real sweat up on the bicycle. I had a set of headphones, with a tape that I liked. I pedalled away, got a real lather up, and then straight into the sauna. *There is a note here which suggests that the sauna was good for chatting to ladies.* Yes, I was there when there was a lady in there. They were female scientists. They were "one of the boys". Nothing racy happened. *I have to ask you about walking back from Stanley with the Director and Deputy Director.* All the hierarchy were there. We had been having a few beers in the bars in Stanley. I thought I had met them at the bus stop to go round the road. The bus never appeared. It was dark. So I said "I have walked along this beach." rather than walk all the way along the road. I had walked along the beach stacks of times. I said "I can get us back there." It was pitch dark. I lost the track. We were stumbling through tussock and water. It was very embarrassing for me. I thought: this is great; I am leading the hierarchy here. I was, but not in quite the right direction. But we did get there. *Let's talk about your time at Rothera. In September 1991 you did the first of four seasons.* I was a base GA (general assistant). *So your steel erecting skills were not required?* No, not at all. We built a hooped structure for keeping the machines in: skidoos, Sno-cats etc. I helped the guys who were builders in the past, but had been with BAS for a long time. We put the foundations in, which was fine. We had to mix a lot of concrete. I remember getting covered in cement dust. We had to take it in turns to load up the mixer. It is all manually done. You are opening bags and throwing them in, and throwing water in to keep the dust down. My eyes got very sore with all this cement dust. I had to go and see the doctor in the end. He cleaned my eyes, nostrils. We put the foundations in. One of the guys with a theodolite and a dumpy level made sure they were all level when we put the wooden frames in. We cast all the concrete and let that set,

8 00.35 with fixings. It was a structure with two flat ends. *Like a Nissen hut?* That's right. We used to have to build up the arch. You could lay it on the concrete base. You could actually rear it up and you would bolt it down. Then you would do the same with another one. Then you would box the blind end in, and you have a building there! You can get in and out with the machinery; not getting it snowed in. *So the old skills came in handy?* Yes, they did. I was put on the cement mixer because it is a vigorous sort of thing and I enjoyed it. Keeping it going all the time, so they are not waiting for the next two or three barrels. *When you told Kathy you were going to go down again. You had been to Halley and you then said to Kathy "Guess where I am going next. I am going to Rothera."* I did not say it quite like that. I said would it be all right if I went for a much shorter season? She must have said yes. There were no bad feelings. She had been used to me being away a lot. I have just got back from trying to walk the full length of the Pyrenees, from the Bay of Biscay to the Mediterranean. That would have taken between forty and fifty days because there are massive ascents and descents; it is not just a path. One of the guys dropped out already. When we got halfway we realised that it was just going to take too long. I kicked myself for not going on alone because I was in pretty good shape at that time. I think we had ascended and descended about 47,000 feet from the Bay of Biscay to roughly halfway across. The guy who I was with said "I have really got to go now." It was where there is a tunnel, the Bielsa tunnel. It is roughly in the middle of the Pyrenees, at a little village called Parzan. I think he had a hidden agenda. It dawned on me that I knew where he was going. He was in a walking group and they were walking in the Alps that year, Chamonix. He wanted to get to Chamonix. He had bought a plane ticket to fly in with them. He said "I cannot hack it any more". I could climb a lot better than him; I could get there a lot quicker. He did struggle. We were both carrying the same weight, 32lbs, which is too much to do all that for that length of time. Kathy had said she did not want me to do things alone because there are dangerous sections on it. *This is quite recently?* Last July. So I said "We will both go back". We did. We had a nice trip back, but I should have bitten the bullet and carried on on my own. It would have been a real feather in my cap. I would have boasted about it any way. *Let me take you back to Rothera. You did some steel erecting but presumably you were doing other kinds of work as well?* There was not much steel erecting. It was all very light work. It was not stanchions and stuff like that. *But you were a general assistant so you were doing lots of other things as well?* Yes, I used to handle the waste as well. I used to collect the waste. We had compactors there. They used to make bales of stuff. You could crush these and it would hold it. You would crush it until you got a bale as big as that sideboard, and it is all bound up, artificially. You get it out and put it on the forks of one of the machines and take it down to the beach ready to load onto the ships, because everything has got to come out. It has got to be cleaned out. I like that idea; it was good. I enjoyed that. I did a lot of co-piloting. That does not mean to say I was flying the aeroplane, although I did have a "hands-on". You get to know the pilots and they let you have a little go, on the seat at the side of him.

9 00.40 *So you were doing a lot of flying?* Yes. I used to go whenever they wanted somebody to go with, to pick up geological specimens down the Peninsula. I was always willing to go. Sometimes, on your day off, Sunday, they could not get anybody, but I would go on a Sunday as well if they were flying. I loved it – fantastic. *You were Sunday cook once or twice?* I am not a cook at all. I know you have got to do your bit. I was going to do it with a newcomer who was going to spend

a couple of winters there. I said “You need the experience”. I put a notice up on the board. I cleared it with the base leader first to see if it is all right. For a charity of your own choice, if you could fast for four days. Anyone who could last for four days gets so many pounds from everybody else; quite a hard way to raise a bit of money. But that drew them in. In the end there were four or five of us that stuck it to the end. But I said that at the end of every day we have got to do a couple of circuits of the runway, just to make it a little bit more difficult. That worked as well. In fact it was going to be a half-marathon but I think there were three of us that did the full marathon at the end of it all. Slowly! It was quite hard. *Was there any resistance to this plan?* No, not really. I did organise another nice little trip. I did a sketch and put a notice up. It was for guys that do not usually get off the base. The GAs are always out in the field with the surveyors and geologists, but there are a lot that don't. The cook for example does not get there. There is a feature at Rothera called Reptile Ridge. If you look out of the base hut, look across where the hangar is built, at the end of the runway. There is this ridge that looks like a reptile's back. I have taken a Sno-cat up there in the past, and gone to the top and had a look, and I have walked it both ways. I said if I can get enough I would take a Sno-cat with a trailer on the back, if I could get twenty going, because there are lots of blokes on base, I would take half the group to the top. We would leave the Sno-cat there and we would walk down while the others were walking up from the bottom over all this terrain. It worked out well. We passed each other nearly half way. I said it was “A Walk on the Wild Side”. It pulled a lot in, the ones that never usually got off base. It was slow. I asked one of the climbing GAs who was on base at that time “Would you look after yours coming up” and he said he would. *This was your initiative?* Yes. I was quite proud of it. A lot of them took it up. *I think you were involved in cleaning up Stonington as well at some point?* Yes, because I spent three winters at Stonington. There is an American base there; Finn Ronne's base was there. We made a big boob about that because we put the seal carcasses in the American hut, for the dogs. I was at Rothera and four Americans came in, from the National Science Foundation, and they asked me if I would go along, because I had spent all that time at Stonington. I said yes I would love to, so I got permission from the base leader, and I went down with them. There had been a good strong thaw and you could see where we had actually cut a hole in their roof and dropped the seal carcasses into the building which had about a metre and a half of ice in any way. But it did not go down very well. We had cut out the rafters, the tie-beams at the top; it was held up with ice at the side. It was not moving anywhere until there was a big melt and the ice was starting to push it out. They had to have some timber sent down to put new bracings in. There was this big hole cut in the roof.

10 00.45 *This was the early nineties?* It was when all the dogs came down from Hope Bay, the last dogs. That finished as a sledging base and the other dogs came down to Stonington. *So you needed more seal store. What was the benefit of putting it inside the American base?* Because you could always get to it. If you have a blizzard, it is all covered up, but if it is in a building that is shedding all the deposited snow you can get to it. But we also had a seal pile outside, on rocks. *You had not sought any permission from the Americans?* No, we thought it was derelict. It was really a derelict place, but it was Finn Ronne's historic hut. I said “I don't know how that happened. I don't know who did that.” I fibbed a bit. I was a bit embarrassed. *Has it been fixed?* Yes, they sent for some more timber and they braced it, because the melt was quite bad. It would have fallen down. They had timber brought down and they reinforced it. It is a bit of a museum now. They gathered

together what they could, all the bits and pieces, and hung them inside. When Finn Ronne was there (or was it Richard P Black?) they had dogs. The Second World War broke out. That was what set things off. They sent an American icebreaker in to bring the Americans out. They had to get rid of their dogs. We had our hut there as well. This was in 1928 I think. We were not there then. This was when the American hut was rebuilt by Richard P Black. They had their own dogs. Because of the war breaking out, they sent an icebreaker in to bring them out from the base. What they did with the dogs (I have read this in their reports). They shot the poor dogs that were down on the spans near the hut. They had an aeroplane as well, to come in and take so many men out at a time. They thought that if it did not work out and they had to come back they would need the dogs, so they shot all the poor ones and they took all the other dogs up the Northeast Glacier to where they made the run down the glacier to take off, the same as our Beavers and Otters did, later on when we Brits were down there. They tethered the dogs around the start point of this runway down the hill to take off. They thought that if they could not get off and had to abort the run, and there was no chance of getting the men away, they would need the dogs to get through the winter. They put them in a ring (they were pegged down) with a charge of explosives, and on the last run they set this timed charge off, and the dogs were killed because they did get off. When the snow melt came, when the fids were down there as well, and the Americans came down, we found one dog carcass which was lying in the ice at the side of the hut. So that was probably one that got away. Perhaps his little explosive charge did not go off and he wandered back down. The American base leader said that he did not know what to do; he was not proud of what they had done. They realised that it was a matter of life and death; they had to hedge their bets, whether they would get out or not. *What year would that be?* 1928, 1930 or something like that. They were there first. *You were clearly aware of the melt-down, global warming?* Oh, yes. It is an island now. *But even in the early nineties it was evident.* It was joined.

11 00.50 Stonington Island was only a small pile of rocks, if you like, aground. It is just a small island, but there was always one ramp, from the pushing of the Northeast Glacier down. There was always a ramp that attached it to the glacier; that was how we used to get up on to the Peninsula: from the spans, up the ramp, and up the Northeast Glacier to the Peninsula and cross over. When I went down with the Science Foundation it was water; there was no ramp at all. There was just water, all the way round. *We sailed round it. Were you shocked?* I was, yes. It was strange. It was beautiful. The weather was good. It was an ice cliff, it was not a glacier snout anymore, and it was calving every now and again. Global warming was the answer. *You went to Fossil Bluff as well?* Yes, everybody gets to Fossil Bluff in the end. Great flight down. *Was there not a special job to be done there, to prevent the hut slipping.* It was beginning to collapse at the front. *What did you have to do?* I set myself the task of supporting it with empty oil drums, with the tops cut out, and filled with gravel, because there was exposed gravel, and boulders. I built these in tiers, so they were eventually resting underneath the front edge of the hut, rather than it sliding away. I spent quite a few weeks at that, not on my own; I recruited other guys as well to do it. I think it probably worked well; it needed doing. That enabled us to build a verandah around the front and the side, with a nice set of steps. Richard Casson came down, a good joiner, a good builder; he built a nice set of steps with a handrail up to the balustrade. You could sit out there with the sun shining from across the Sound, and look out. It was good. It was falling away at the front. *Again was that your own*

initiative? Yes, I could see that this was what I would like to do. I remember digging under the front, to support it directly under the front at first. But then it was on a big slope so I thought I had better build another ramp of these drums. It was a lot of drums, that were battered into the ground. I think it was a good structure. *Tell me about Port Lockroy, because that was your last job really.* That was a renovation. That was good. There was a team of five of us then. We went in. Dave Burkitt was in charge; he is a good joiner. He is an ex-naval man: very good joiner, good builder, good worker. There was Rick Atkinson who was a fine dog-man. He has done the Iditarod, in Canada, and the Yukon Quest. The dogs were not in evidence down there then, anyway. Lockroy, being the first base down there, was ready for restoring. We smartened it all up: new felt on the roof, new battens, painted the battens, repaired the windows, cleared out what was a Nissen hut at the side, where they kept all kinds of stuff. It is a real visitor centre now. *That was in the mid-nineties.* It would be, roughly. *Were you already having visitors then?* Yes. They were not supposed to in the first season. We were supposed to get so much done, and then if they came ashore, well that would be OK. The first one was an ornithological cruise (bird-watching). Everybody loved to come ashore. The Japanese used to come as well. A lot of people visited. It was not quite finished, but it was safe, and it was looking good. It was painted, new glass panes put in, a nice walk up on wooden steps. *What were your feelings? You had worked in the Antarctic for thirty-odd years, and now suddenly you were turning it into a theme park.* Not a theme park. We were returning it to how it was; that was how we saw it. *To its original condition?* Yes, that's right. *For tourists, all the same.* They like to see the base.

12 00.55 It is a post office now as well, and it makes a lot of money. *You weren't uncomfortable about attracting tourists to the Antarctic.* No. They were coming anyway. They would come ashore. I cannot see people stopping them. They used to have supervisors that, when they went to have a look at a rookery, kept them so far away from the penguins. They did not want to be disturbed. They were doing that bit right. I was pleased to see Lockroy like that. I think we all were, as a team. *Then to South Georgia, and the whalers' church.* That was leaking, so three of us cleaned it all up, refelted it, etc. We made a nice job of that; we made it watertight. That was all we had to do: make it watertight. *You must be a unique man, with so much work that you have done in the Antarctic.* I enjoy work. I am a physical guy. I am going to hospital, for what I have done to my hand, for working too hard. It has been operated on twice already, and I have just got to go again. *What I mean is, I know there was a gap in the middle but I cannot think of anyone else who has been working there over four decades.* A lot of good workers get there. *But not for quite such a lengthy span.* I enjoyed it. *You must have been the oldest fid in the business.* I probably was, yes. I had a big beard then, long hair and whiskers. *How did the others regard you, with you vast experience? Were you the "grandfather" of the outfit? Because you were still then in your sixties.* I did not pretend to be important. I did not think I was anything special. In Fossil Bluff, in the little bunk where I was sleeping, I put all the dates down and where I was, in pencil, on the wall inside. I wrote at the side "Never ever say 'Never, never again'" I put a list down. I had been to just about most of the bases, I suppose. *Do you sense a special position, a special relationship with the Antarctic because of the length of your connection?* Yes, I have seen it at its best and I have seen it at its worst. I would go in a working capacity. I would not want to go as a tourist. I think I would like a physical input, but the memories are very good. You don't go down that many times, of your own free will, if you don't like it. I

enjoyed it. I enjoyed meeting some very nice people. Ladies were starting to go down. I saw my first female down at Signy Island. I walked into this corridor and there she was looking at a noticeboard and it really rocked me back on my heels. She was a young lady and was the first one I had seen in Antarctica. That was at Signy. The ladies are very welcome there. Some of them are tougher than the guys, I think. We had one or two at Rothera as well. A leopard seal killed one of the young ladies. It did not eat her; it dragged her under the water and drowned her. I was not there then. *I was trying to put a finger on this special relationship between Ben Hodges and the Antarctic. Could you help me with it? You had to keep going back. I wonder why.* I don't like packing, ready to go away. Kathy will tell you that. I hate that. Once my rucksack is packed, and I think I have got everything, I am quite happy to go to the airport. We get flown down there now, to Mount Pleasant, and pick up the boat there, or pick up a plane there which flies backwards and forwards to the bases. It is just a nice place to be. I have always had friends down there. There has always been somebody. I have never been there and not known anyone. *Would you say it was your spiritual home?* A strange thing. When we did a tellurometer survey at Fossil Bluff, years ago.

13 01.00 It is quite hilly round about, but you can walk around safely in the summer when the sun hits the rocks beneath the snow and it melts very quickly. I used to climb to one or two of the small peaks, just drag myself up there – not rockclimbing or anything – and I remember looking over into this valley on the other side. I was on my own, and I strongly felt: if there was a God, I am sure this is where He would be. I felt that very strongly, I really did. I it was a strong feeling. I suppose I am agnostic; I am not a believer now. I don't think it does work like that, but I had a strong sense that that it where He would be. I don't think I have said that to many people. *So of all God's creations, that would be his favourite place?* Yes, that is where He would do it all from, if you like. *His 'HQ', you mean?* I did not think of it as His headquarters, but I imagine Him being there, the Spirit of God or whatever. I did not burst into tears or anything like that. But it was so silent, and so empty. *So you felt closer, nearer, to whatever it is, there?* I did, yes. It was a strong feeling, and I suppose God just entered into the equation, into the scenery. *Is that why you were happy to go back so many times?* I was always happy there. It is just that on that one occasion, I was perhaps a bit happier, but quietly happier. It was not that which drew me back. *But it was a special moment?* Yes, because I was on my own there as well, just there, at that particular time. Yes I am not ashamed to say that that is how I felt. It was a real feeling. It did not come again. *Was it a physical feeling, like a shiver?* I think it probably was. It was a sudden inward opinion: this is where it would all happen. If He was a figure, He would be here. *Ben, thank you very much indeed.*

ENDS