

MIKE FLEET

Edited transcript of interview with Mike Fleet conducted by Chris Eldon Lee at the Hope Bay reunion in Coniston on 20th of October, 2009. Transcribed by John Zerfahs, 17th December, 2013.

[0:00:00]Lee: This is Mike Fleet recorded at the Hope Bay reunion in Coniston by Chris Eldon Lee on the 20th of October, 2009. Mike Fleet.

Fleet: Name is Michael Fleet, no middle name. Date of birth 4.4.40, nice easy one, and place of birth Ickleton, near Cambridge, near where the Imperial War Museum is. We used to go and see the planes at Duxford.

[0:00:31]Lee: What kind of education did you have, Mike?

Fleet: Normal primary, then 2 grammar schools, ??? [incomprehensible] grammar school, and Andover grammar school, Southampton University degree in geology, and having got the degree in geology that's when I got the job with BAS.

[0:00:48]Lee: Why geology? What was it that (talkover)?

Fleet: Well I thought that, I was the outside type and felt like travelling and seeing the world and that seemed to be a good place of doing, well I didn't envisage the Antarctic when I started doing, or chose, geology, I thought more in terms of crawling up streams in Africa looking for diamonds and things.

[0:01:09]Lee: So you wanted adventure, the Rider Haggard experience you'd rather have that experience?

Fleet: Well that's the sort of thing, yeah. No sit back in the office at home. I didn't want that, I wanted to be out and about in the countryside.

[0:01:20]Lee: So the doctorate you're not a medical doctor?

Fleet: Oh not a medical, no. No, when I got back from BAS I went to Birmingham University to write up my work as a scientific report, number 58 I think it was, and I did a parallel Ph.D., which is similar but not quite the same. Some things I could say in the Ph.D. but I couldn't say it in the scientific report but they are essentially the same thing. So that's where that came from.

[0:01:48]Lee: What's your first memory of having anything to do or knowing about the Antarctic?

Fleet: I suppose the first time was I saw '*Scott of the Antarctic*' when the film came out.

[0:01:58]Lee: John Mills.

Fleet: Yeah. I remember seeing that. And that was back in 1948 I think and, I would have been 8 years old then. But I remember going to see that.

[0:02:10]Lee: What sort of impression did it have on you?

Fleet: I can't really remember very much about it, lots of snow and ice I think and that was about it. I think I was too young to really appreciate it, I just remember going to see it. It didn't sort of affect what I wanted to do later on I don't think. I just carried on as I was.

[0:02:33]Lee: So how come you did go to the Antarctic, what was the process that got you there?

Fleet: I think I had just taken the finals, not got the result, and [pause], what's his name, can't think of his, he came round, Bill Sloman, yeah I'm being a bit fuzzy like that but..

[0:02:50]Lee: That's ok

Fleet: That's right. No, Bill Sloman came round and gave a chat at Southampton University, and I think it was mainly to the geology, probably geography departments as well, and I went along and saw the pictures of snow and ice and everything and to be honest I took it in, it was interesting and then one of my other geological co-students said 'Oh, I might as well have a go at that', and there were application forms there and 'Well I might as well pick one up', so I did, sent it off, got the interview, and got the job. I wasn't quite sure what I was going to at that stage.

[0:03:31]Lee: You knew where it was?

Fleet: Yeah I knew where the Antarctic was yeah, I knew it was down there rather than up there, and I knew that much. Yeah I knew where it was ok, no problem.

[0:03:42]Lee: What do you remember of the interview?

Fleet: There were three. Ray Adie was one, he was the geologist, and one other, one other did the talking I think that was Bill Sloman. And the third one he didn't say anything. I always assumed he was some sort of kind of psychologist, because to do this work as a geologist you need to have experience in geology, or a degree in geology, you need the professional qualifications, but I suspect that he was quietly thinking out 'How's this bloke going to get on with a dozen or so other people in a hut cooped up all winter', I think that is what he was there for. He did ask me had I been to various places, but I hadn't done all that much. My parents never had very much money so I couldn't do very much in the way of travel so I explained that, well I lived in the country and found that, I found all my interest in that, I didn't need to go to places to find more interest. I think it proved I could occupy myself, not dependent on other things or other people keeping me amused and interested. I was a bit of a loner I suppose in that sense. But presumably they thought I'd got the right sort of character to go on an Antarctic trip.

[0:05:07]Lee: I guess they were trying to spot the extremes of character which might be a problem quite...

Fleet: I think so, yeah. I belong to clubs now and you get extreme people in there and you think 'He wouldn't be suit(able), I wouldn't wanna go south with him' [laughs].

[0:05:22]Lee: Did you get to know Ray Adie in your time?

Fleet: Oh yeah, because before I went the first thing I did was go to Birmingham University for 3 months initial training, and so he was there and he was training me, in inverted commas. I think that when that training started up they did have a bit of practical dog sledging. I remember people talking about the dog whips [phonetic] and a bit of plane tabling. I didn't do any of that. I just kept on ... the classical books to read, so I was just reading books. He didn't seem very keen on me talking to the other geologists because I think he wanted me to go down as a fresh graduate and not be influenced by what had gone before me, so I'd get the fresh ideas coming out. That's how I interpreted that.

[0:06:18]Lee: What sort of man was Ray Adie?

Fleet: Oh very precise and, especially with grammar, you know things like when I was writing a report you wanted to say the Hektor Glacier, you didn't write 'the', it was always Hektor Glacier not 'the' Hektor Glacier, and punctuation things like that. He was very fussy about that. It was good, though, because the output was good.

[0:06:46]Lee: So he was precise in other ways was he?

Fleet: Yeah he was very precise, yeah. One thing I remember, not nothing to do with being precise, he had me in a room at the University separate, and he always used squeaky shoes, and you always knew when he was coming you'd hear these squeaky shoes, he walked quite fast in these squeaky shoes, so I'd put the magazines away and get the Antarctic book out [laughs]. It's something that, it sticks.

[0:07:17]Lee: Before you went South did you have a clear idea of what your brief was, [talkover] your job be?

Fleet: I knew I'd be going down to do some sort of geological map [phonetic], I don't think I was told precisely 'You will do this particular area'. Possibly the reason was that I left England in October and so the previous people were still working there, and working through the summer, so he wouldn't have known just how far they'd got, so you couldn't say 'Well they got to this point and you can carry on from that', so he wasn't in a position to do that before I left, but when I got South, [pause], at some stage I had a letter or a note of instruction saying what I was to do.

[0:08:08]Lee: Is this one you opened on the ship?

Fleet: No, I don't think I did until I got there. I'm a bit hazy on that, though [talkover]. I'm just trying to think. It might well have been sent down by radio, because what I was saying

that the others were still working and so you couldn't finalise the ideas, I've got a feeling it may well have been sent by radio to the base leader of the time, and I got it that way, I think that's what happened.

[0:08:40]Lee: Good. So what did you find yourself doing in the end, certainly say in your Hope Bay season?

Fleet: Yeah. Ok, well, as a geologist my job was to go to an area and put the rocks on the map. So I'd take one bit would be granite this would be ??? [incomprehensible], this would be Jurassic Volcanic so you end up with a nicely coloured map and work out the relationships of one to the other, you know, which is on top of the other. Even though you know on the ground they're laid out horizontally but one may go under the other, so you had to work that out and work out the geological history of what was going on. So that was my main work, it was a reconnaissance because the map was largely unfilled at that time. People had been down the coast, but I went up into the glaciers and so went in to the side of the, into the centre of the Peninsula. You know the Peninsula is 5,000 foot, so there's not any means of crossing over where I was working that's why I went to Hope Bay and Stonington and worked from one to the other, rather than going somewhere like base F which was certainly a lot closer but you had to get over the top and that wasn't practical.

[0:10:06]Lee: So the job was identification.

Fleet: Identification of rocks, yeah.

[0:10:11]Lee: Were you collecting samples?

Fleet: Oh yeah, yeah. I relied on that quite heavily, because the way the work was done I'd go up with the dogs, I'd go up the side of a glacier and just grab a sample really, just grab a sample look at that little bit then move on to the next exposure and grab another sample. And in fact I worked it out afterwards that at the time I was there I only actually spent 14 days when I was standing in front of a chunk of rock, hammer in hand. The rest of the time was all spent travelling or lying up or on base because I couldn't start, so in that sense it was very inefficient. So, having grabbed a sample and worked out what that was, that's when it went back to Birmingham University and it got torn to bits, sliced up and put under the microscope, ground up and analysed chemically, and plot graphs and identify the individual minerals. So that's what I was doing when I got back, and then put the whole lot together as a, hopefully, coherent story.

[0:11:22]Lee: So it's quite a long process then, you were out in the field the first two years collecting the bits, then you had 3 or 4 years back at University going through the bits.

Fleet: That's right. Got back in '64 and I was doing that until April '67.

[0:11:37]Lee: We'll come to that a bit later on ??? [incomprehensible] get the broad picture. So were you able to do much in the way of analysis actually on base at Hope Bay or indeed at Stonington?

Fleet: Not chemical analysis. We did have a means of making thin sections to put under the microscope, but that was a very tedious method, but I think I made a couple but it involves cutting the rock, sticking it onto a sheet of microscope slide, and grinding it down until you get the precisely the right thickness, and that's a lot of work.

[0:12:16]Lee: So the light would come through it?

Fleet: So, yes, the light comes through it and you use something called cross polarisers which changes the polarisation of the light and according to the mineral it reacts differently and you get different colours and helps you identify what the actual minerals are.

[0:12:33]Lee: Were you having fun?

Fleet: Oh, very much so, yeah. You know I've often thought that hearing how people do it now, 'No thanks' [laughs]. Well I probably would if I was starting from scratch, but if I had to choose between doing it in the '60s when I was there and doing it the way they do it now there's no contest. I'd certainly do it the '60s way. It was so much more exciting. I did have free time as well which is another thing that I don't think people going down have anything like the same amount of free time to explore. I learnt photography and enjoyed watching the wildlife and spent a fair bit of time doing that.

[0:13:09]Lee: Did you find any geological surprises or was it all very much as you might have imagined?

Fleet: The only thing that I comment to that sort of question is I did find about half an inch of coal, and a little bit of copper, but, not really, no. Found some fossils out on the eastern end of Robertson Island which is right out the far end of the Seal Nunataks.

[0:13:34]Lee: What were the fossils, do you know?

Fleet: I can't remember the names they went off to the British Museum to be identified, they were cretaceous fossils, so we had already deduced that they were cretaceous fossils they link in with the Snowhill Island and Seymour Island fossils there. There's some cretaceous sediments along there.

[0:13:53]Lee: And did the coal come as a surprise, or had you already worked out the basic fact that it was going to be there somewhere?

Fleet: No I wasn't expecting it. It was within a sequence of Jurassic Volcanics, which isn't the normal thing for coal but I assumed it was a, it wasn't lava it was, well they called them in those days ignimbrites, they were the, when the volcano goes off it sends clouds of gasses and dust and mineral fragments and they come rolling down the hill, and there was a lot of those, I identified those by the way the crystals were broken up, and it was in that so I think it probably may have come down on something like a bit of a peat bog or maybe just a forest. You know if there is a forest there and you get this hot ash coming down flattening the lot and no oxygen so it wouldn't burn and presumably just carbonised.

[0:14:51]Lee: But the concept that the Antarctic was once tropical, was that commonly held by the ??? [incomprehensible] in the '60's when you were there? Or was this a new theory emerging whilst you were being (talkover)?

Fleet: No, I think, Hope Bay was famous for Mount Flora and the fossil plants there so I certainly knew about that before I went down, that came out very early so I don't think that was a new concept. At university when I was doing geology we were talking about continental drift, which is now plate tectonics, so the idea of continents moving around had been put forward well before I went south, but exactly how they collide and one goes under another and you get the Pacific Rim of Fire, I don't think that had really, it was just beginning to come out as I graduated. I could see how tectonics were affecting the Peninsula for instance you just look at the shape of it, it's curved, and if you look at the bit that goes up to South America, you come to the end of the Peninsula and you go round South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands back to South America you can envisage something being pushed through, so I could envisage that but just as a layman, actually. I tried to incorporate that in my Ph.D. by explaining the rocks, why the rocks were where they were.

[0:16:18]Lee: Why was this work so important, obviously it produced a Ph.D. for you but, was there a greater importance than that?

Fleet: Well I did wonder about the political side of things in those days.

[0:16:29]Lee: Can you elaborate?

Fleet: Yeah, whether, well with anything like this you've always the possibility of finding minerals or oil, and I think the main thing was claim on the Antarctic, because the Argentinians and Chileans also claimed the sectors, almost the same sectors as us, and I think it was partly at least quite a bit of it was occupation, certainly with the Argentinians and Chileans from what I saw. They were simply army units sent there to occupy it and perhaps took a few meteorological obs, and that was it. But at least I think BAS did have this strong scientific programme and of course that's been developed to what it is now, which is a world leader as far as I can tell.

[0:17:20]Lee: So, the theory was you knew what the rocks were you had a better claim to the land?

Fleet: I think that was an excuse for being there. We weren't quite so blatant about just going there sending people to be there as the Argentinians and Chileans

[0:17:39]Lee: You mean we were being British, were we?

Fleet: Yeah [laughter]. Well there is the research side. We always want to explore anyway and we were genuinely exploring the place, so it's a case where the money comes from, and I think having a possible claim, I think that's what produced the money.

[0:17:59]Lee: So you didn't meet any Chilean or Argentinian geologists down there, they weren't doing that kind of thing (talkover)?

Fleet: Not geologists, no. There were, you probably came across this already but, there was the Argentinian base right next to us at Hope Bay and we saw them, but they were mainly army personnel, and didn't do all that much, I don't think. Well I think they had a pretence of doing a little bit but not to the same level or standard that we did.

[0:18:29]Lee: How did you decide when you were doing the field work with the dogs and tents and presumably a G.A. with you, how did you decide where to go?

Fleet: Well the first year I was with Tony Edwards who was a surveyor and he'd been to the same area before, so I was largely dependent on him. He knew I needed to get to as much rock as possible so he largely took control of that, and decided where we'd go, 'Right now we'll go up So and So Glacier', and we'd go up So and So Glacier and I'd stop off and get the rocks so it was largely under his control. Second year, when I was the experienced person and I chose where I wanted to go, and planned it myself.

[0:19:16]Lee: By definition then it must have been rather hit and miss, you can only go where you can actually get?

Fleet: Oh yes, yes. Some places I just couldn't get to.

[0:19:26]Lee: So were you joining up the dots back at the hut?

Fleet: Partly that, but we were issued with binoculars, and [laughter] called binocular geology, you stand back and see the rocks a mile or two away. To some extent you can identify the rocks through binoculars, like there is a red granite and a white granite, which obviously white and red, so you could pick those out, and the Trinity Peninsula series was a dark colour and probably folded, and Jurassic volcanics tended to be horizontal, so to some extent you could hazard a reasonable guess at what there was two miles up the glacier that you couldn't get to. So there was some of that as well.

[0:20:09]Lee: You spent two years doing that one at Hope Bay and one based at Stonington. Similar work?

Fleet: Yeah, it just continued where I left off, except I'd had the previous year's experience and got a better feel for it. I did feel afterwards 'cos one of the things BAS did, most people were only taken on for two winter contracts, and I was, and then after that 'Nice knowing you'. I thought if I went down again I'd do a much better job because of my previous experience. Or even if I could go back to some of the areas that I'd visited. You go to a rock face and, 'What on earth is this?', and then you go a bit further along and you take it in context as a whole area rather than individually, 'Oh yeah, that must be so and so', and how nice it would be to go back with that in mind, but I couldn't actually do that.

[0:21:05]Lee: Was that a frustration?

Fleet: It was, yeah. It was. I don't like, you know when I was writing it up, I like to be more sure than perhaps I was. Remembering the very first rock I went to it was a miserable, dark, grey day, and the sledge pulled up and I walked 100 yards or so over to the rock and got this

chunk, 'What the hell is it?' [laughs]. I took a specimen and did work it out afterwards but, if I'd gone to the area again I'd have known 'Oh yeah, this is a bit of a Jurassic', and you've got that background to start with, but when you start with a completely blank canvas it's sometimes difficult.

[0:21:48]Lee: And you were fresh out of in university, weren't you?

Fleet: Oh I was, yeah, first job.

[0:21:52]Lee: No previous experience?

Fleet: Well, part of the training was that you did go out and do geological mapping, but not in ice and snow.

[0:22:02]Lee: Why were BAS so keen on new recruits, on new graduates. Why didn't they go to hoary old geologists who knew a thing or two?

Fleet: Well I think two theories on that. One is that they wanted fresh ideas, and the other one is new graduates are cheaper [laughter].

[0:22:19]Lee: We'll come back to the Antarctic shortly but I just want to follow this through now so, at the end of your second winter, second season, you came back, and all your specimens had arrived safely?

Fleet: They did get back, yes, surprisingly, because I did have to leave some to be flown out and they did actually catch up with me.

[0:22:38]Lee: Describe the environment you were working at then in Birmingham University what was it like?

Fleet: Oh it's er, I suppose classic university, old style university. We were in research room 1, and Ray Adie was along the corridor and had his own office and so there, I don't know, 5 or 6 of us all in research room 1 it was a drawing office and I eventually married the girl in the drawing office, it didn't last too long but, that's a fact that it happened anyway, and so we all gathered round the microscopes there, oh, and we'd also, if we were grinding up the rocks for doing the chemistry, we did that ourselves actually, we had to get the sample, put it through the grinder, sift it out, and then dissolve it in hydrochloric acid and all sorts. That was all done by us personally. I suspect nowadays some specialists would do that.

[0:23:32]Lee: Why was it done by you, lack of anybody else?

Fleet: I think so, yes. Nowadays you've got all sort of machines that will produce the same information in a fraction of the time, but (...)

[0:23:44]Lee: So you were chemically analysing the rocks

Fleet: Yes. What I was trying to do, certainly with the granites, what we call triangular diagrams. You plot out, forget just what they are, probably sodium, potassium, and silicon,

anyway three points in the diagram, and for each rock it plots in one part of the triangle, and you get another rock and it plots in another part, and you put all of them on, and what you're looking for is either they all plot in the same place, in other words they've got the same origin, or they form a line, which means that the rocks are progressing with time. And with something like a granite which is a liquid it does that because it's crystallising, and some of the crystals drop out, and the composition changes. So that's the sort of thing I was looking at. And it might be a granite, looking at the granites, which are underneath volcanoes you've got granite which is a magma, and when granite erupts as a lava, it comes out the top, then what you can do is get a sample of the lava, put it on the same diagram and you can say 'Yes, that lava is related to the granite'. That was the sort of thing I was looking for there.

[0:25:03]Lee: You were still employed by FIDS at this point or were you back at your [talkover]?

Fleet: Well it was BAS then.

[0:25:08]Lee: BAS, you were still employed by BAS?

Fleet: I was still employed by BAS, yeah, and I was a registered Ph.D. student.

[0:25:14]Lee: Were there moments when you still didn't quite know what you had in front of you?

Fleet: No, I think by then I got a pretty clear idea what I was doing and, the report came through of course I had the other people around me if I did have any queries.

[0:25:31]Lee: And were you still having to make educated guesses where the white bits on the map were where you hadn't..?

Fleet: Yeah, I suppose one spot yeah you do ... Well we also had aerial photographs which helped, so you get one sample from the bottom and then you get the aerial photograph out and you can see well that block of rock is all the same thing, and then the rock, what's perhaps more of an educated guess is where to put the fault lines, and you do that by, you got a block of rock there, a block of rock there, you have a snow gully, and the fault lines tend to erode preferentially, so you get a gully and if the two rocks are, blocks are quite different then you tend to say 'Well that's probably a fault line'. So, that was a bit of an educated guess.

[0:26:20]Lee: But you were able to cover a whole map in, you weren't leaving white patches?

Fleet: Well there were white patches where there's too much snow cover. So that like the glaciers, you could do the sides of them, but in some cases you could get across, yeah, but the glaciers themselves are big gullies and are likely to be, because the ice finds the line of least resistance like water, and a fault line tends to be where the rock is broken up, that's the line of least resistance, so the glaciers probably follow a fault line anyway.

[0:26:54]Lee: So was the Peninsula heavily faulted then?

Fleet: Yeah, oh yes, plenty of faults around. Yes they've been crushed by the orogenic movements so, it's not too surprising.

[0:27:06]Lee: Let's take you back to the Antarctic and, I'm always interested in things that went wrong were there any close calls?

Fleet: Yeah, erm, there are all the crevasses.

[0:27:16]Lee: All the crevasses?

Fleet: Well there were lots of, well actually probably the worst part of it were crevasses. You were never quite happy when crevasses were around so close calls I mentioned a couple I think, one was going up Bill's Gulch, that's just opposite Stonington, and it's on the east coast and with a name like that it had to be named by the Americans [laughs], but we'd done the depot run and we were coming up and because it was a depot run we had three dog teams and we were trying out the Eliason motor toboggans for the first time, they're used all the time now but these were rather pathetic little things but we were using them, so there was a convoy coming up, I was, three dog teams went up the glacier first, I was with the first of the Eliasons and it got bogged down and, it was quite a common occurrence, and I set to and just pushed it out and 'Oh yeah, crevasse', and you know you get the blue hole down there and carried on. The next one came along, the Eliason got over but the crevasse bridge collapsed underneath it and it was, I dunno, 10 or 12 feet wide, and the two sledges jack-knifed like that, and there were two people on there was Pete Kennett with the Eliason, Tony Marsh ended up in this jack-knife position in a vee shape, with the gaping hole underneath him, and..

[0:28:48]Lee: How did you get him out of that?

Fleet: Well, we did. I think we probably held the sledges and he just climbed up and out, I can't quite remember now, but that was a near miss. It could have been me gone down, quite easily.

[0:29:01]Lee: Was that the one near Stonington?

Fleet: Yeah Stonington, yeah

[0:29:06]Lee: Tell me about the Eliasons because this was new technology wasn't it?

Fleet: It was new, yeah. Yeah they'd been sent down to us to try out, and I think they went to Halley Bay as well, and we got these things and played around with them. First of all we had them on Adelaide Island which, I don't know if I put that in there but my middle summer I went to Adelaide Island, I suppose this is a failure in a way, went to Adelaide Island, first ship out of Hope Bay to Adelaide Island the plan was that I was going to be flown back to the area to do some more work in the summer, and we sat at Adelaide Island it must have been mid-December through to January, and the planes just didn't get us over there. It seems there

was a weather barrier and good weather on one side but bad weather on the other side, and so I had quite a nice time at Adelaide Island, spent some time helping to build a hut, got myself a flight down to Fossil Bluff as co-pilot, you know the pilots like company, so I was sitting in the co-pilot's seat going back and the pilot said 'Oh, I need to have a fag, take the controls', so that's the one and only time I've flown a plane.

[0:30:21]Lee: How was it?

Fleet: Oh it was great, I had a little bit of trouble maintaining height and so on but it was [talkover].

[0:30:27]Lee: It's rather important isn't it, to maintain height?

Fleet: Yeah, but he was sitting next to me, I'm sure he would have grabbed the controls if it was going too far wrong, you just had to keep an eye on the heading and altitude and (...)

[0:30:38]Lee: Is that an indication of the kind of attitude towards that kind of thing, at the time?

Fleet: Well I'm sure it was, yeah. I'm sure that certainly wouldn't be allowed now, anything like that.

[0:30:49]Lee: Let's just go back to the Eliasons then, because, did they prove to be that reliable, or not?

Fleet: No we had a lot of problems with them. They weren't very well made, like you had the track, and that was running on wooden runners, so with the friction they didn't last too long. Had problems starting, and they didn't really do the job they expected which was to pull more weight on sledges than dogs could carry. In good conditions they could just about do it, but once the snow got soft, or you started going up a gradient they just didn't, and you couldn't traverse with them, go along a slope because they just sliding down it's so difficult, well it's difficult with dogs anyway, but the one time I felt that they really did succeed was getting stuff up Sodabread Slope, I don't know if you've come across this anyway, a 1 in 3 slope, it's a real problem getting stuff up, the one time we did succeed was when, it was my idea I claim it, just take the Eliasons, just by themselves, put a couple of boxes on it and the driver, and just drive up, and that worked very well. We spent the day taking everything up a box at a time, whereas the dogs can barely get the sledge up let alone any payload, and people had tried pulleys and all sorts but, so that did actually work well, but other times not so well, and then there's was one famous occasion which in Fuchs's *Of Dogs and Men* (*sic*) [should be *Of Ice and Men*], where he hasn't got it quite right but what happened was that it was a very cold morning actually, minus 35, and this was March, and we used to warm them up first, start the engine, drive them around, warm them up, Pete was driving his, hit a bump and it threw him off and it cleared off towards the horizon, and of course we'd filled the fuel tank up, it went 12 miles before it stopped.

[0:32:55]Lee: Did you ever see it again?

Fleet: Oh yeah, that's how we knew how far it had gone, we just had to go out with the other one and bring it back. But of course that was couple of hours delay, I suppose, while that was done.

[0:33:07]Lee: So, was the attitude towards them then to not use them very much because they weren't so reliable, they weren't that useful?

Fleet: We weren't keen to use them but the way the field trip was planned we had to use them. There was a lot of opposition from the dog men, I didn't have a dog team of my own, I was always second man, but dog drivers they were very anti, and they felt that they were much more at risk in crevassed areas. You know, dogs will just jump over, or if the first one goes down the rest of them stop. Except for one instance I'll tell you about if you like. Yeah there was that, and unreliability, starting them in the morning, they were just breaking down, or bits, especially the belt drive thing, that was constantly giving trouble. So on my main trip, the second year, when we were using them, we used them to do the depot run, then the main trip that left in September there were six of us on that, with two dog teams?, two dog teams, two Eliasons I think it was, and one of the Eliasons it made it to the depot and then stuck on the first trip out up into the sort of hinterland, it just broke down terminally and it's still there. I at least managed to drive mine for the full 1000 miles or so, so quite pleased about that and got it back to 3 Slice Nunatak and left it there for the next week to come out, and that's probably still there now as well.

[0:34:43]Lee: Was there a sense, when these machines arrived, that the dog era was being threatened? Were the dog men very [talkover]?

Fleet: Well they certainly felt threatened. I think a lot of them didn't really believe it would happen. I must admit I could see the writing was on the wall for the dogs. The construction of this thing was so poor, but seeing the machines they've got now I think it was inevitable. Never mind the reason the dogs were taken out anyway, that was because they're not an indigenous species, that's a separate issue. I think it would have come anyway.

[0:35:21]Lee: And they realised that, the dog men spotted that did they?

Fleet: I think they spotted it but didn't want to accept it. They just called them all sorts of names like Eliason became Elsan, the toilet system which we used, they called it that.

[0:35:38]Lee: You were going to tell me a story about the dogs

Fleet: Oh yes this is another crevasse incident. That's in *Of Dogs and Men*.

[0:35:46]Lee: This is Kevin's book.

Fleet: Kevin's book, yes, it was referred to in that. Coming back, this was back from my main trip at Stonington, virtually the end of our sledging days, actually, coming across the plateau we got up Bill's Gulch crossing the plateau, coming down into the amphitheatre, and just where the lip goes over all of a sudden we found ourselves running parallel to a crevasse, which of course is not the done thing but you do get caught out sometimes, and the lead dog

went down, then the next pair, next pair, next pair, they all went down just like a zip fastener, and threw the sledge over so that didn't go over, and luckily we did manage to get the dogs out, I think it was Ben Hodges that I think went down and brought them up, because they had to be brought up one at a time, you couldn't heave the whole lot up. It wasn't a particularly wide crevasse, but wide enough to take the dogs.

[0:36:45]Lee: And wide enough to take Ben presumably?

Fleet: Yeah, he managed to get down, yeah. I think it was probably about three foot or so.

[0:36:51]Lee: You were on the other end of the rope, were you?

Fleet: We all six of us there, so I was just the mere geologist, but we had people who were much more experienced with ropes, like Ron Tindal, Ian McMorris had done quite a bit as well. I'm afraid I just stood and watched because there was only room for one to go down and a couple of people on top, so I wasn't very much involved in that.

[0:37:15]Lee: How was Ben chosen or did he just choose himself?

Fleet: It was his team, so I think that's probably the main thing. Then he was a general assistant anyway, but he was a builder by trade, rather than a mountaineer, but I am pretty sure it was him that went down.

[0:37:29]Lee: It was. There was no question of not getting the dogs back?

Fleet: No. No, we knew they were all alive and kicking, and fighting [laughs], as they do, so that there was no question of anything else, and just, well rolled up their sleeves and got on with it.

[0:37:51]Lee: One or two got out of their harnesses I believe.

Fleet: Yeah I believe so, yeah. I couldn't remember that actually but reading the write up, the other book, I think it might be worth your while trying to get it if you can. When *Of Dogs and Men* was written people sent things in and a lot of it didn't make it, and I think it was called *The Book that Never Was*, and there are a few copies of those floating around. You know you might pick up some interesting information in that.

[0:38:21]Lee: So apart from the dogs being threatened by mechanical snowmobiles, what other significant changes did you, have to taken place over time?

Fleet: Well, between then and now? Well I think the big difference is that a lot of fieldwork is done in the summer. In my time the summer was for unloading the ships, and then get them out of the way, then the sea ice to form, and then you go and do your field work. Now, I'm thinking of Rothera, I'm not so sure about Halley Bay because it, well, that's Halley now, isn't it, but not so sure quite how they operate, but certainly Rothera, people fly in for the summer and then almost immediately fly out to their field area and they're left there for the summer then fly back. There's no question of sea ice or anything like that. So I think the

work is much more intensive now than ever ours was, it's much more efficient of course, but not so much fun.

[0:39:23]Lee: How would you say the improvement in communications has changed or, not only changed the way the experience of going south but also who gets chosen?

Fleet: Who gets chosen to go South?

[0:39:35]Lee: I'm thinking now in comparison you had been selected because you were going South, you were going to be alone and isolated for 2 or 3 years, now you can ring your mates.

Fleet: Yeah, you can now, there's things like satellite phones and email and all the rest of it now. I probably even, talk about email in a tent but you probably got a satellite, I'm sure there are satellite phones so they're in constant contact all the time so, yeah they can contact one another.

[0:40:03]Lee: Does that change the nature of being a Fid?

Fleet: Oh I think it does. One of the things was the total isolation, you know the hundred words a month, what was it 200 words a month coming in, 100 you probably got this anyway.

[0:40:19]Lee: Hundred going out.

Fleet: Hundred going out, (hard work writing them) so, and very little contact otherwise, and very little idea what was going on in the outside world. I heard that Kennedy was assassinated.

[0:40:32]Lee: How did you hear?

Fleet: Well, it was on the field trip. We used to tune in to *Voice of America*. We'd get the radio out, we didn't use it much because the batteries weren't very efficient, but we'd get it out and get it going and maybe waiting for the sked with base, then, say, tune in to *Voice of America* and just heard that come through. Couldn't believe it.

[0:40:58]Lee: How did you respond to that because some other Fids were quite deeply affected by tragedies in the world?

Fleet: Well I wouldn't say affected. I was really shocked and surprised by it, but, ok, well, that's happened. Then there's the bit about the Russians installing their rockets in Cuba and..

[0:41:18]Lee: Bay of Pigs.

Fleet: Yeah. And being told to get lost. I think that happened just as I was about to go down, because I seemed to know a bit about that, but I can't really remember anything else. Well, one thing I do remember is the very cold winter of, I think it was '63, but that was information coming from home via the ships rather than the radio, so really in terms of communication we were almost completely cut off.

[0:41:49]Lee: One or two Fids said they felt powerless. They were listening in to what was happening with the Cuban missile crisis, the Iron Curtain going up and (...)

Fleet: Yeah, that's right, yeah. Well I felt, well, I'm glad I'm in the Southern hemisphere if anything does go off but, if those things did go off well, I dunno, what would happen, but er, no, the only thing I felt about that (...)

[0:42:09]Lee: You weren't worried there might not be a world to go back to?

Fleet: Well, it did cross my mind, I didn't think it would be like that, but, if there wasn't a world to go back to would we be able to get back anyway? Because the ships wouldn't come down if the world had been destroyed. No, that didn't really concern me as a real possibility, just a vague possibility that's all.

[0:42:31]Lee: Back of the mind job?

Fleet: Yeah. You know I was enjoying myself, I want to carry on like this and make the most of it. If the Northern hemisphere gets blown up then so be it. [Both laugh]

[0:42:44]Lee: What about health and safety, were you very conscious of being safe and secure at all times?

Fleet: Health and safety in the sense that we've got now?

[0:42:53]Lee: Well yes.

Fleet: Well I think they've gone way over the top. Well there's so many risks with sledging, the sea ice, the tents blowing away, the crevasses, that er.. Quite a few times when I did wonder whether the tent was going to survive the current storm. Then, of course, crevasses as well, we'd be, 'Has one got me name on it?' One is always aware of that, but there wasn't much you could do about it.

[0:43:24]Lee: Did you follow the guidance all the time, or were chances taken, risks taken?

Fleet: Well I think sometimes when you've got to get from A to B and there's a crevasse in the way then you may have to go over it, no choice, so a lot of it was, you just had to do it, and sometimes the risks were pretty obvious. You didn't have a choice, you just accepted that as part of what we were doing.

[0:43:55]Lee: You weren't prepared to die for your work though, were you?

Fleet: Oh no, no, that wasn't the intention [laughter]. No things like, I always made sure I was attached to the sledge, we had the waist band and the hook over the handle, I made sure I had that when we were in crevasses, if I suspected crevasses at all, when the sledge got to where I was going to work, we'd park and wouldn't park right next to the rock, I'd have to cover some distance, you always wear skis. A couple of times might have roped up in case, so quite sensible about that. I didn't really climb up at all. Virtually all the geology was the

bottom bit of rock, the first bit I could get to the easiest bit. Still I quite often had to get across a *bergschrund*.

[0:44:48]Lee: A what?

Fleet: A *bergschrund*, that's where the, you've got the ice fixed to the rock but it tends to pull away, and it doesn't pull away by the rock it pulls away and leaves a crevasse parallel to the rock face and, had to get over those, and wind scoops could be interesting, where the wind's blown round and you have a deep, smooth scoop that you had to negotiate as well. I don't think they were dangerous, you might have just slipped down and said, 'Oh, how do I get out?' [Laughter] But, no, that would be alright because people eventually pull you out, it was just a slide down.

[0:45:26]Lee: What did you think of the wild life down there?

Fleet: Oh it was fantastic. You know I really enjoyed that. All the penguins, of course I'd got a cine camera like so many people had and so I was filming the penguins and taking, I'd learnt how to develop black and white pictures so I was doing those, I spent a lot of time with them.

[0:45:46]Lee: You were killing seals?

Fleet: Yep.

[0:45:49]Lee: How was that, for a geologist?

Fleet: I was quite comfortable with that, I had been used to catching and killing rabbits, it came ok, and I knew we had to do it to feed the dogs. I was a lot more blood thirsty then than I am now. I'd tried eating most of the things there, tried penguins, tried skuas, cormorants, fish, tried all those. It's a bit of fresh meat for the diet, but of course you can't do that now. That's something else people miss going down now. Couldn't even think about, even touching any of the wild life, let alone killing it for food.

[0:46:32]Lee: And also of course these days the concern about the retreat of the ice.

Fleet: Yeah, well I've been back twice this century 2003, 2005 and it's really... really find it depressing, especially Hope Bay. You know the ice has just vanished, and the other thing that's depressing is the spread of the orange Argentine huts everywhere. So in Stonington, I don't know if you know Stonington, but you've got the island and in my day you could go straight up around onto to the Northeast Glacier, but now that glacier has retreated 100 metres or so, so it's very definitely an island, and it was very depressing. But I did find it difficult to relate the two things, with Stonington in the 60's and Stonington now, it's quite different things.

[0:47:24]Lee: You went back twice this decade?

Fleet: Yeah.

[0:47:27]Lee: On tourist ships, or?

Fleet: Well the first one was called the Lars [phonetic] Memorial Foundation trip, it was a Scandinavian trip. The object was to retrace Captain Larsen's route, when he lost his ship just off the east of the Peninsula. He got beset in ice, and he was part of the Nordenskjold trip in Snow Hill Island, part of that one, and the plan was to go back, retrace his steps, and have a ceremony where the ship sank, and it was arranged by the great, there was two greats I think, great, great grandsons of Captain Larsen, and they traced a lot of people, or the descendants of a lot of the people who were either on the ship or part of Nordenskjold's expedition, and they offered it to the Hope Bay people, and four of us went, there was Brian Hampton, Roger Robson as well, and Mike Thompson, and the others were the descendants, and interested people, and there was a Czech, half a dozen Czech people I think they were just filling up a few spaces with them. So that was the first one, went back there, so that covered Hope Bay. I thought 'Ah well, I've been back', and then the Marguerite Bay 2005 trip came up, and I went on that, and luckily for me, last one covered Hope Bay, this was otherwise known as 'Stonington or Bust', 'cos I wanted to go to Stonington, and the two complemented one another really well, because they covered quite different areas, but mainly they covered my two bases. So I went on that.

[0:49:12]Lee: What were your feelings as you cruised back towards Stonington and saw the current state of play?

Fleet: Well, it suddenly appeared. We arrived early in the morning and went out and 'Oh, we're there', and it was a lovely day actually, cloudy at first then it cleared, and there'd been a fresh fall of snow so everything was nice and clean and pristine with the fresh fall of snow, but the base very disappointing because it had been extended since I was there, and it was really quite a mess, there was nothing left inside it and that was very depressing to see it in that state and I thought it was a great pity. I managed to find my old pit, and look around but, it wasn't what I expected and that's the reason I didn't actually go on the Millenium trip. I thought 'Well, should I keep my memories as the 60's, keep them that way', but then my curiosity got the better of me and I went on these other two.

[0:50:20]Lee: When you say your pit, what do you mean by your pit?

Fleet: My bed.

[0:50:24]Lee: Oh your bed?

Fleet: Bed, my pit, yeah. I found that but, it seemed very strange. I would like to have had longer to look around more, especially at Hope Bay. Stonington's just an island so you couldn't go very far. But Hope Bay I would have liked to have had more time to get further afield, go up to Nobby Nunatak, and round to Depot Glacier, that sort of thing but, the four hour rule applied and, you know about the four hour? Well the tourist ships they can only put 100 people ashore at any one time and for maximum of four hours, so that rather restricts you. I think as Fids we had a bit more leeway than the normal tourists but, even so, it would have been nice to have longer. So, yes, I've got mixed feelings. I'm glad I went. I doubt if

I'd go again. The only reason I might go again is if something goes down the East coast where I was working, and especially if it would go to my Fleet Point, I think I mentioned that in the previous [talkover].

[0:51:28]Lee: ??? [incomprehensible].

Fleet: Yeah, Fleet Point, yeah

[0:51:31]Lee: Why that particular spot?

Fleet: Well, because it's Fleet Point and I didn't [talkover]

[0:51:35]Lee: But why was that spot called Fleet Point?

Fleet: Oh why? I don't know actually.

[0:51:39]Lee: It wasn't one that you [talkover]?

Fleet: It wasn't where I was working. There was a place up in Starbuck [phonetic] Glacier a nice granite bluff and I thought 'Well if they're going to name something after me I want that, I want Fleet Bluff', but I had absolutely no say in it, and I didn't actually find out 'til I think it was until 1997. I think it had been decided and put on the map long before then, but I was never told, and talking to other people most people aren't told, they just find out, 'cos most of my contemporaries do have something named after them, like Ben Hodges and, he's got Hodges Point, and you just find out, and in some places I've had the pleasure of telling people 'Oh you've', like Pete Kennett, he didn't know, and (...)

[0:52:28]Lee: It's a bit bizarre that you're not told isn't it?

Fleet: Yeah, it is yeah, and I've had the pleasure of telling them, because while researching for details on my point I've found out other people's points, and now there's a digital map with all the names on and the gazetteer and so on so it's easier to find out now. But that's all come out since.

[0:52:50]Lee: Was there any indication back in the 60's that the snow and the ice were beginning to retreat?

Fleet: I don't think so, no. We did think 'Well, the summers are unusually warm', but I think somewhere like Hope Bay you get these *Fohn* winds that come down, very warm winds and there's a certain seasonal variability anyway, so not really, no, I don't think we were conscious of that at all.

[0:53:19]Lee: Looking back over your life as a whole, how important now is that period of time in the Antarctic?

Fleet: Well it's very important to have that experience. When I got back I sort of drifted away from things once I'd written things up went to Canada and then I came back worked in the water industry, don't know if I put that but, that's what I did anyway, and I'd always kept

some sort of remote interest in what was going on, but I wasn't involved in any reunions, and it was the Hope Bay reunion, I'm not sure the date, it must be 15 years ago there was a big one, and I was found. No, in fact what happened there was a talk at the Royal Geographic Society about the last dogs coming out of the Antarctic, and John Killingbeck was giving that, may not be a name you know yet, oh you do, and he had a sledge there and Princess Anne was there, and I went, and I recognised Ben Hodges, 'cos I hadn't been in touch at all and sort of went over and spoke to him and he told me about these various reunions going on and the next thing was the big Hope Bay reunion, he got a high proportion of people, and from there I've joined in with the Marguerite Bay reunion group, and the BAS club. And I'm in the Antarctic Club, but that's too stiff and starchy for me so I don't go to the meetings but with those three I go to most of them now and it's a big thing in my life. And the thing is it happened right at the beginning of my career. You know having done that, well, what could beat that? Nothing can beat it.

[0:55:11]Lee: You understand how Neil Armstrong feels do you?

Fleet: Oh, very much so, yeah. Actually I did, I qualified as an amateur diver, and I did some voluntary coral reef surveys in Belize a thing called Coral Cay Conservation, did two months there, and come back and sort of post trip brief, and 'Wasn't that the most exciting thing you've ever done in your life?' and for everyone else it would be, but I had to say 'No, it's not [laughter] it's the Antarctic'. I'm sure he understood.

[0:55:45]Lee: Can you put your finger on why the Antarctic experience is so special?

Fleet: I think maybe partly the age group, because it was the first major thing. Now I'd like to liken it to a lot of the old soldiers, First World War soldiers, they have similar feelings, and I think it's the hardship together at a young age. If this had happened when I was in my 50's when I'd done other things it might not have had the same effect, so I think I was at an age when I was very receptive to that sort of thing. But it is what I did, the isolation, the very special, you know, just doing it, and being isolated for two winters.

[0:56:35]Lee: Was it in any way a spiritual experience? You were dealing with the very early stages of creation, weren't you?

Fleet: Yeah I s'pose so, yeah. Going to places that nobody had been to before, that was very special the odd thing was that I'd go up a glacier and I'd think 'Oh, nobody's been here before, huh, so what?', but now I've come back and I would think back to being on that glacier, or that spot, then I would think 'Well, that's rather special isn't it? The first person to ever to go to that particular area'. But at the time it didn't feel special, because it's just a bit of snow and I'm standing on it. But yeah, it's just the whole experience, I think.

[0:57:24]Lee: You have a Polar Medal?

Fleet: I do, yeah.

[0:57:27]Lee: Mike.

Fleet: Yeah.

[0:57:28]Lee: Why?

Fleet: Well, that's what puzzled me. My impression was that in the early days everyone got them, and then they started, I think, started thinning out, there are so many people going South, so they started thinning out. There was a round of Polar Medals given out soon after I got back, and I wasn't on the list, so I thought 'Ah well that's it, I'm not on the list', then four years later there was another batch it was 12 people, and I was on the list, and I worked it out the chances were if the people had been down in that period, about 400 people had been South would otherwise be eligible so it's 12 in by 400 chance, and I was talking to somebody at one of the reunions and I think why I got it was, I overwintered, I did major sledging trips, and I stayed on afterwards to write it all up. I think those were the main, oh and I was a good boy, got on with people and behaved myself. I think those were the main criteria. That's what I was told, the same thing with the Fleet Point.

[0:58:41]Lee: Did you go to Buckingham Palace?

Fleet: Yeah, I did, and got it from the Queen Mum.

[0:58:45]Lee: The Queen Mum?

Fleet: Yeah. Yes so she's always been special since that, yeah that was a very special day. I was by myself, you didn't all twelve went up at separate times I don't know what reason it, mine was come out as part of the New Year's honours list, so I went up. They start with the knighthoods at the top, and the Polar Medal was the very last, the lowliest of the medals. So I had to do something slightly different at the end because people troop up get the medal troop off, I had to back off do a bow and, I think I may have had to wait until she went back again, but still, yeah, it was very special, very proud to get that.

[0:59:28]Lee: Mike, thank you very much indeed for your time.

Fleet: Good. Hope you find it of interest.

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- Recollections of Ray Adie [0:05:22]
- Work of a geologist [0:08:40]
- Further geological methodology [0:25:31]
- Problems with motor sledges [0:30:49]
- Crevasse incident [0:35:46]
- Comparing work conditions in the 60s with that of today [0:38:21]
- Retreat of the ice [0:46:32]
- Importance of the Antarctic experience [0:53:19]
- Receiving the Polar Medal [0:57:24]