

Orr_Neil

**Edited transcription of Neil Orr recorded at the Hope Bay reunion in Coniston by Chris Eldon Lee on the 20th October 2009. BAS archives AD6/24/1/54.
Transcribed by David Price 04 February 2014**

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

Orr: my name is Neil Orr, I was born in South India on the 4th August 1931.

[0:00:20] Lee: Why were your parents in India?

Orr: my father was a medical missionary and my mother's father had been a medical missionary as well. My father worked with David Somervell¹ who'd climbed Mt. Everest, you'd remember Mallory and Irvine. When he came back through India he was so appalled at the state of medicine and said 'I'm coming back here to work' and so he worked for forty years in India and my father worked with him.

[0:00:31] Lee: So you spent a lot of your childhood there?

Orr: No, in those days you weren't really expected to stay in India after the age of seven. My elder brother came back on his own at the age of seven in a boat, he went to stay with his Glasgow cousins. My mother and I and my younger brother came back when I was five or six, six I think, and then my father came back a year later. It wasn't considered healthy for young whites to live in the tropics of India in those days.

[0:01:19] Lee: Were you therefore destined to be a doctor if it was in the family lineage?

Orr: I was, I wanted to be a doctor ever since I wanted to be an engine driver and neither of my brothers had the slightest inclination so there was no pressure on me. I just always wanted to be not only a doctor but a surgeon, I wanted to be a manual labourer.

[0:01:40] Lee: Where did you obtain your qualifications?

Orr: I was at Cambridge and St. Thomas's. At Cambridge I was what they called pre-clinical doing your, you know, doing an M.B and then I went to Thomas's for my clinical work and I went back to Cambridge to get my degrees.

[0:02:00] Lee: What was your first brush with the Antarctic?

Orr: I, my first brush was I think, my sixteenth birthday when a very good friend of my parents gave me a book on Edward Wilson of the Antarctic and I was absolutely smitten with this man. I became a great sort of heroic era fan of Scott and Wilson and so on and thought that that's the sort of thing I'd like to do. So I got to know about them quite a lot.

[0:02:40] Lee: What was it about Wilson that really captured your imagination?

Orr: He was a man of action, a doctor and a man of action, a sick man, TB, and went off to the Antarctic and did all these wonderful things. He was great moral support to everybody

¹ Correction, it was Howard Somervell, not David. Somervell was on the 1922 and 1924 Everest expeditions, during the latter he together with Norton climbed to over 28,000ft, without supplementary oxygen. An accomplished climber and doctor. He later worked for 40 years in a missionary hospital in Travancore, South India.

from Scott downwards. He was a great watercolour painter, he had great Faith he was sort of, a Man for all Seasons I think, and one of the few people I didn't find to have feet of clay². So I have always been a great admirer of him, I've gone off Scott quite a lot [laughs,] and stayed with Wilson

[0:03:20] Lee: So how did your inklings about going to the Antarctic become reality, what happened?

Orr: Soon after I took my final exams at St. Thomas's I went off to an expedition to a little island called Socotra which I'm not going into too much because nobody knows where it is³ but I wandered around among the mountains and decided that nobody had visited that century. This is in 1956 and I took blood from troglodytes who lived in caves, to see what their origins were, thought to be the Isle of Terraces of Incense and where a great incense trade with Egypt and things came from, just off of Cape Gardafui. People had never been near it because you couldn't get on to it, there's no harbours, and monsoons bashed it one way heartily then bashed it the other way. So, we were flown onto there and when I came back St. Thomas's, the director of St. Thomas's pupils said 'You've lost all the best jobs and why did you go?' and of course it worked exactly the other way. We had a film on TV and an article in the Sunday liar, The Sunday Times. One had leap frogged rather than retracted and then about eighteen months later when I was working as a doctor, a very junior SHO at St. Thomas's, FIDS came to Thomas's and said we are looking for doctors to go to the Antarctic and the secretary came to me and said 'I just wondered whether this would be the sort of thing you would be interested in.' I said I would be absolutely fascinated, 'would you like to apply?' and I said 'Yes, but not just at the moment because I really want to get my feet onto the ladder, I'll consider it next year.' so I went and saw the powers that be, Bunny Fuchs and Co, there was not much in the way of a big interview. They said 'Right, come along, you'll have to get a trade, make some sort of programme before you go' and recommended the Medical Research Council. So I enjoyed my last six months at St. Thomas's, I did that job, I used to go up to the Medical Research Council and finally took six months working up a programme of Physiology, there was six months gone then I went away to the Antarctic for eighteen, two and a half years and then came back again for another year to write up my MD thesis on the work that I'd done. So it really was four years out of my medical career.

[0:06:06] Lee: Let's just go back a little bit to see, this interview you went to. This was Fuchs, was it Bill Sloman?

Orr: Yes, it would be Bill Sloman I think.

[0:06:14] Lee: It wasn't that rigorous evidently?

Orr: Absolutely not. In getting to know them later I realised, they said the important thing to us: if a man has got a good career ahead of them and is making good progress in that career and is prepared to give it up to go to the Antarctic, then that's the right sort of chap for us.

[0:06:39] Lee: Did you sense some psychoanalysis going on?

² Feet of clay. A reference to the interpretation of the dream of Nabuchadnezzar- King of Babylon by the prophet Daniel, see Holy Bible, Book of Daniel 2:31-33, and 2:41-43. The analogy refers to someone who appears strong but who actually has a weak point or character flaw that could eventually cause their demise.

³ Socotra (Suqutra) A small island in the Arabian Sea off the coast of Somalia but actually belonging to the Republic of Yemen.

Orr: That was the psychoanalysis [both laugh.] No more than that, I mean I'd played rugger for the hospital for three years, I'd been on another expedition. I was actually employed by the hospital so each of those things showed that I was going well up my ladder and I was about to drop it and go and do something else.

[0:07:12] Lee: So they said 'Yes,' they held a place for you?

Orr: Yes, that's right, for a year.

[0:07:15] Lee: Did you discuss or at what point did you discuss the kind of work you might do down there? Apart from patching up fallen Fids.

Orr: Fallen Fids really was the least of the work because fit young men in the ideal environment don't get ill, and they didn't. They were just falling down crevasses and that sort of thing, no I think, I really can't think how I got started on it. They put me in touch with Julian Taylor who you're going to meet later, he was very keen on nutrition of dogs and things. I think Fuchs had some ideas on nutrition and people getting, losing, weight. He reckoned like Scott and Co. it was all due to dehydration and not melting enough snow and would I go and show and prove that it was dehydration and so on because the thesis if we come to be more specialised I went into more detail. Was that people going back from sledging journeys had always lost an enormous amount of weight and they could put it back on in a couple of days. So they just thought that they could come back to base and turn on the tap, get picked on, bring round the beer or whatever it was and replace their fluids, and that was the obvious thing.

So I was given, I worked out with various people in the MRC which we can go into later if you like. If one could measure a) how much fluid they took and b) how much they passed and whether they concentrated their urine and could also measure their skin fold thickness on base and on field trips. At the same time we worked out a programme with Ian Hampton who was coming as a pure physiologist in which he was interested in dehydration and people who went on the original Weddell Sea, the advance party of the Trans Antarctic Expedition which Fuchs led, had done a lot of work on circulation in the extremities, and they'd noticed that after the end of the time when having built this hut in severe cold they could do all sorts of things with their fingers which they couldn't do before. So we were interested or Ian found, got himself really interested in circulation, warmth and circulation and I did that with him but it didn't grab me nearly as much as food for as soon as I went on a sledge trip, my very first sledge trip I was just bloody hungry and I said 'If this is sledging I think it's bad news.' And I really developed... I began to see really one was just not eating enough and worked away at that until I could develop my ideas.

Over the two years I found that peoples body weights which I kept, I've got it down stairs, a great thing of, the body weights of every one on base, as they came on base. Purely from the base point of view when they came off the ships and had a long three months across the Atlantic they were all a) Fat and heavy, then two or three weeks of really intensive physical activity working up to 24 hour days getting stuff off the ships and on the ships before the ice came in. They got fitter and fitter and their body weights went down and their skin fold thickness went down and stayed like that. And then in the winter when they stayed on base it went up again. I said 'This is all to do with activity.' Doing the same in the field I found that peoples body weights went down and down and down and stayed there but there really wasn't much change in their urine, urine throughput or their fluid intake or anything it was just actually calories. So the same I was doing with dogs which is another thing I developed really quite separately. But dogs thrived on seal meat which they were fed on alternate days

about 7 to 10 or 9 lbs. We used to saw the seals up with a felling axe, all frozen. we shot them and then chopped them up and they thrived on that, it was very good for their coats and then when they were sent into the field they were given a diet of Nutrican⁴ which replaced pemmican and they were interested to see if they were absorbing this but using just a pound of pemmican, Nutrican a day as opposed to 7-9lbs of seal meat on alternate days. So I was weighing them and so I found that the ones that were only getting a pound per day were losing condition and losing discipline. They'd been very much like those dogs on Scott's expedition, who didn't understand dogs at all, and they had put it all down to indiscipline and I just reckon that there was not enough food.

So finally at the end of my second year I ran three teams all together and one of us fed our team on a routine diet another fed their team on one and a half of the diet and another fed their team on twice the diet, after, we were laying depots and working really quite hard and travelling long distance. After two or three weeks really the one on the normal diet were totally undisciplined and very difficult to drive and difficult to control and then it ran on two were perfectly disciplined and did all the leading at the end because they were just better fitted. If you treat dogs properly they perform better. At the same time I went on a long trip with Fritz Koerner who I became great friends with, he thought much the same ideas as myself and we went on a routine trip laying depots right down on the sea-ice and right up on the big glacier, losing weight like mad, after a couple of weeks all we dreamt about, like Scott and Fuchs, what we are going to eat? And what we had for our perfect meal and lovely things which, and then I said 'Tomorrow we'll eat exactly what we like,' we'd taken enough food to do it and we had sort of fanciful ideas about what we would have and so on. I ate 9000 calories the next day, the nutriment was free you see, I ate 9000 and between us, we each had 23 apple fritters which was really quite something. We took dehydrated apples and little perks and we had 23 apple fritters, we just gorged ourselves. The first day I'd had 9000 calories the second day 6000 calories and it came down and we went on eating just what we liked and we ended up eating 5500 calories a day. That kept our body weights steady and we were much, our morale was better we could do work better, we concentrate better and we found that 5500 for everybody after that latterly was the ideal diet. You'll find that's what an Olympic rowing eight or lumberjacks use or most of the modern Antarctic explorers will eat at least 5 or 6000 calories a day.

[0:15:20] Lee: Did you find yourself on a collision course therefore, with Fuchs and the FIDS hierarchy?

Orr: Yes, yes.

[0:15:26] Lee: How did that resolve itself?

Orr: Well they got more 'aah!' [Hands around throat.]

[0:15:31] Lee: So they took your advice?

Orr: Yes, they did basically.

[0:15:34] Lee: So sledging rations were increased?

⁴ New Nutrican – or Nutty, superseded the 'old' Nutrican which was unsatisfactory. The 'New' consisting of beef fat, whale meat and corn flakes in equal proportions with a calorific value of about 2,500 kcal. It remained standard fare for huskies. They were fed one block per night and an extra one every third night, if possible. The feed would be supplemented with seal meat when available.

Orr: Oh yes, quite definitely.

[0:15:41] Lee: So getting more food was not the problem?

Orr: Well they, I mean latterly one was much better equipped with back up in the way of radio for depots and things. And of course latterly dogs were removed altogether so we weren't worrying about Nutrican, we were worrying about diesel which wasn't considered to be eco non-friendly whereas dogs were. Mad thinking, but still that's a different story. But they certainly get much more food now.

[0:16:17] Lee: Thanks to you.

Orr: Well.

[0:16:20] Lee: Well you were there you were the man at that time doing the work.

Orr; Yes, yes that's right.

[0:16:23] Lee: It could have been someone else?

Orr: Yes, yes.

[0:16:25] Lee: Yes, I quite understand. Let's go back a bit, you travelled down on the *Shackleton*?

Orr: Yes.

[0:16:31] Lee: So that's where you were doctor on the ship?

Orr: Yes that was very interesting that'll take an answer. Well, there was I, an SHO in a London hospital.

[0:16:40] Lee: SHO?

Orr: Oh that's Senior House Officer, pretty junior stuff, just one up from a House Surgeon, 18 months qualified and extremely naive except we had fairly lively patients from Lambeth who came to our Casualty Department and I learned a certain amount of low life but I wasn't really used to problems that sailors get when they go ashore travelling in foreign parts and they, that was quite interesting. Other than, and then of course at the end when we got to the bottom, to the Antarctic, we visited all the bases at all the ones who hadn't got doctors. Then I was able to check their medical problems, it was only the bigger bases, I think there was only a few bases in the Antarctic that had a doctor at the time and we had various interesting cases which I could tell you about.

[0:17:35] Lee: Yes, I'd be interested.

Orr: One was we heard of a base, a small base, whose life was totally disrupted by a case of appendicitis and this lad who actually was the base leader had roused Port Stanley when the ice had come in saying that he'd got pains in his abdomen and Dr Sladen was there and so he said 'poke it here and press it there' and said 'do you feel sick?' all the questions you'd ask them and because he was anxious he said 'Yes, yes, yes it hurts there, it hurts there.' and so Sladen said 'well it sounds very much as though you've got appendicitis, I should go to bed and take antibiotics.' So they put him in his bunk and plans for base work that year were kyboshed I may say because they were meaning to travel a bit. And every time a ship got

near him, the Chileans and our HMS *Protector* and things, all trying to get down to send in helicopters to get there. As they approached he got better and then they had to withdraw because ice conditions, he got worse. So when we eventually got there with the *Shackleton* I thought we were going to find a really quite sick chap, and so we went ashore and took a sledge and dog team and sleeping bags and things and there he was in the base looking rather like the Old Man of the Sea with a long, long beard and long, long hair and I examined him very carefully and I couldn't find anything wrong with him at all. Anyway we put him on sledge and got him back to the *Shackleton* and hoisted him on board, it was just coming up to lunch time so I said 'there's no point in staying in your sleeping bag, but come and have some lunch, you'll like that' I said a few of the boys would like that too, so he had a couple of good chews, went down and had a good lunch and after lunch 'Would it be a good idea if I cut your hair because I had become the barber on the ship, I'll cut your hair, trimmed your beard' so I cut his hair and trimmed his beard and he never looked back and it was just how by not having the security of genuine medical advice you can get things right out of proportion, and it really did bugger up the base for that year I understand.

[0:20:09] Lee: You're avoiding saying the name of the person or the base.

Orr: I couldn't do that.

[0:20:15] Lee: No, I see, fine, alright. You're being diplomatic.

Orr: I've never, I've got diaries, I look back in my diaries about this man and I think I have got his name in there but really it's irrelevant.

[0:20:30] Lee: I was judging by what you told the men there, I was surprised there was any gin left on the boat.

Orr: Let's see, you're talking about, you're talking, the Fids had their own gin and if you're talking about Captain Blackburn who was an ex-naval Captain⁵ and retired and he had no ice experience at all, as far as he was concerned ice was friendly stuff which floated around on top of his gin. He would bash it backwards and forwards trying to break his way through and he broke his rudder, bent the rudder. So we had to go back to FIDS, to the Falkland Islands and the surveyors had a look and said 'You'll have to go back to Montevideo and get a new rudder.' I was the doctor on board, I had to go back with them instead of getting off at Hope Bay when I should have done, and as Capt. Blackburn had brought his wife and left her in Stanley, we found in Stanley that there were as many gin bottles as there were milk bottles at her back door and she had by that time got the DTs so there was a new notch to my quiver. She was really my first serious gin person and she'd rush around the deck with nothing on except her husband's dressing gown which was open at the front so you 'I am the Captains wife, lower the ships, lower the ships.' all I found that I could do for the three days that we were travelling up to Monte was play cribbage with her, or liar dice, and drink gin. I would pour her a small gin and leave virtually no gin, they both liked pink gin so I put in Angostura⁶ and we played cribbage and I just eventually managed to put no gin in it at all but she. It was extremely difficult to get her into a proper medical establishment with her connivance, or her admission, but we did and she went in and she had very good treatment.

⁵ According to the Navy List Captain Blackburn held the rank of Commander.

⁶ Angostura Bitters, concentrated bitters made from herbs and spices, traditionally made in W. Indies (Trinidad and Tobago) but first produced in town Angostura, Venezuela about 1830.

[0:22:50] Lee: In Monte?

Orr: In Monte. She sent me a very nice message saying thank you very, very much you've been a great help and from him, so they appreciated it. It was very interesting but we had our own gin in the Fids mess and the officers had their own gin up there so it didn't cross. [DP Issue]

[0:23:11] Lee: looking back on these early escapades, did you take it all in your stride or were you at all concerned or nervous or was it a young man's bravado, that you could do anything?

Orr: I was fairly confident, and there was nowhere to go to, it wasn't as if I could say 'Help!' I suddenly found myself amid my own, and I also found myself being treated with a respect much higher than I deserved. The First Officers and the Captain and things would ask my advice about medical things and then when we got very good friends, asked my advice about all sorts of things. As the medical officer one found one's self not only, I just found myself very good friends with people all up and down, a tremendous entre, being a doctor. I became very good friends with Bill Sladen the doctor in Port Stanley. I got really quite friendly with Arrowsmith⁷ who was the Governor and he gave me introductions to people in South Africa to meet on the way back. I just found it opened doors to all sorts of people and it helped my self- confidence immensely.

[0:24:30] Lee: Did you have a decent library to turn to?

Orr: Yes, the Ships' Captains Medical Guide is marvellous and we had a very good library and of course once I had established a very good rapport with Dr Sladen I could always refer straight back to him if there were problems.

[0:24:47] Lee: And did that library go with you to Hope Bay or, ?

Orr: The library at Hope Bay, we were equipped like a destroyer apparently. We were equipped exactly the same as a destroyer with the surgical instruments and a library comparable to a M.O on a destroyer.

[0:25:07] Lee: So what did you have to do at Hope Bay, did you have broken bones to deal with?

Orr: Well as I said, no illnesses, because fit young men in an ideal environment don't get ill. We had the odd broken bones, Ian Hampton dropped down a crevasse quite a long way from base and dislocated his shoulder and split his skull. The dog man who was with him, Ron Tindall sewed up his skull very expertly with, I think, twine from a, we made our dogs' harnesses with, I can't remember, but it healed up extremely well. Then we had to go down, Keith Allen and I with a sledge to bring him back, and that was called the Mercy Dash, it was really a very interesting and rather exciting trip.

[0:25:58] Lee: Would you like to elaborate?

Orr: Yes, because I was, my second year I was Base Leader, the first year, I can talk about dogs later but I had trained a team up from puppies and we travelled a couple of thousand miles together and we were the greatest friends my dogs and I. The second year I really wasn't able to travel nearly so much because I was very responsible, felt really conscious of my responsibilities for the logistics of the base and so.... the ships coming in and out and

⁷ Later, Sir Edwin Arrowsmith.

when they came, when the ships came in and out normally we'd all get off base if we possibly could because the last thing we wanted was the disruption of ships, but I had to be there so I really hadn't travelled as much. I said 'before the end of the season I want to get one decent trip and I went off with Adrian Allen⁸ who was a geophysicist and I couldn't ever get to grips with radio much, so our radio skeds were just on time and as brief as possible. I certainly didn't keep the radio running or anything like that anymore than I keep my mobile phone on nowadays. I just, for me I, totally foreign to me and they found it very difficult to get hold of me when Ian fell down the crevasse because he fell down just after our radio sked and there wasn't another one for three days. So they had to come out from base, I wasn't too far from base and told me about it so Keith Allen and I took off straight away down to where they were and with our radios on and I do remember there were just the two of us and one team, that was my team. I think we stopped on sea-ice which was a thing which we never did if you could possibly avoid it.

[0:28:12] Lee: You stayed the night?

Orr: Yes because there are plenty of previous things I can tell you about, the sea-ice had gone out and people had gone out with it and not come back and so on. A blizzard came down in the evening and we were on the sea-ice, there was no question of coming back because we had to press on, so we just said 'Right, we'll just have to camp on the sea-ice' and all during the night we could hear creaks and groans and huffs and puffs I thought 'My god the sea-ice is breaking up' but the next morning it had cleared and we saw that we had camped within about 50 yards or so of a blowhole that seal, that killer whales had made about 50 miles away from the nearest open sea. They keep their blowholes open and come up and they were the killer whales huffing and puffing in their blowholes, and if we had gone on another 50 yards we would have dropped straight in and made a nice supper for them. But we avoided that and then we found, this is some days, a week or so I suppose before we, before after the accident we got to their camp and they had stayed there until the end, they were really very good orderlies, his head had healed beautifully and he'd just got this dislocated arm. So we strapped him in a sledge in his sleeping bag and came back with three sledges, Bill Tracy and Ron Tindall and Keith Allan. Ian was on the third sledge with Ron Tindall, we were coming back over one of the islands, and then down, down a glacier and it was really nice easy sledging and I looked round and shouted to Bill 'Where's Ron?' and he said 'he's just behind' I looked and said 'he's not you know' and he and his team and Ian Hampton had all dropped down a crevasse. The team hadn't just the sledge and Ron Tindall who was driving it and the patient had dropped down, by the time we got back Ron had climbed out because we always tied on, at least we hooked on with a safety harness and his happened to have slipped off but the handlebars had jammed just near the top, the sledge had turned over and the handlebars had jammed and Ron was climbing out muttering very strong Scottish oaths and Ian was complaining about the snow going down the back of his neck and sleeping bag and he of course immobile to do anything. So we got them out and I said when we got them out, I always used to carry a flask of rum on the handlebars of my sledge, I had a flask of rum and some binoculars, and my sealing knife. I always had the sealing knife so that I could cut traces if a dog went down, and I offered him a slug of my rum. He's a physiologist 'Oh no you can't have alcohol on a mountainside' so had his share and he had a cigarette. So, so much for his physiological ideas. So that was that little excitement.

⁸ There were two Allens at Hope Bay that year 1960, Adrian Allen geophysicist and Keith Allen, General Assistant(mountaineer).

The other one coming back with Fritz Koerner after we'd travelled with these dogs very hard and they'd lost a lot of weight, Mac went down a crevasse, one of the dogs, and when we looked down he was hanging in his harness not too far below and as we pulled him up he started to, came up to the brink of the crevasse and as he got up to the top he put his fore feet up above his head to try and get up and of course he dropped out of his harness right down the crevasse, down and onto a shelf a long way below. And so I went down, with just Fritz and I it was really, with two people it was really quite tricky. I went down and put him, tied him onto a ... and Fritz pulled him up and so on and that was because he was rather thin because he had been on the normal diet. And then I climbed out afterwards as I perhaps could well do because I, no I wasn't, I was perfectly compos and perfectly fit, but if you drop down and lost consciousness there was really almost nothing that just two people could do, which was a thing we used to discuss a lot. That was another crevasse incident we had.

[0:33:17] Lee: A couple of supplementaries then, why did you feel it was imperative to go and rescue a dog, is that what one did?

Orr: Yes, I mean, it, he was quite endeared to me as anyone else would be.

[0:33:34] Lee: How did you repair Ian's arm?

Orr: Well then that was, then I did have to get him into, we got him back to base and the Argentinians had a base 200 yards away, in Hope Bay, they had an x-ray machine, so we took an x-ray which showed he had a fractured dislocation of his elbow. So then I got into touch, then I got out my books, I got in touch with Bill Sladen and we set up a little operating theatre in the base hut and the dog man Ron Tindall administered, I think, the Pentathol⁹ a low level general anaesthetic, I remember vaguely I gave it to him, he just, and I gave it a good tweak, having read all my books and got my advice and it came back perfectly well. Slowly we mobilised it, and it really was his, not a lot worse off, you can ask him about that tomorrow.

[0:34:39] Lee: Was the Argentine x-ray machine actually operational?

Orr: Oh yes, they could make it work, they had all the gear, they didn't actually do any work. I could tell you more stories about those. Did you want to stick on crevasse stories just while we are there? On another base they, a chap, two of them were up on a col¹⁰ and this chap dropped down a crevasse. Again we used to discuss and argue endlessly about whether you had a safety harness secured to a sledge or one where you didn't have a safety harness and you could let the sledge go or whether you had one you hooked on, that you ended up hooking on but always wearing a safety harness. Anyway he dropped down a crevasse and his mate dropped a climbing rope down to him, instead of putting on, wearing a proper harness just tied it onto his belt. Then, one man can't pull one man out of a crevasse because when you get to the top you've got a shelf to go over, anyway he tied it to his dog team and the dogs, who weren't very well disciplined just roared down the hill and he popped out of this crevasse like a cork out of a bottle. Then the rope cut through the shelf and of course as he hit the shelf the belt broke, he dropped and the belt came out like a cork out of a bottle and he dropped down the crevasse and that was the end of him. And all we got from that was medical advice over the radio. There was nothing one could do, it was a very salutary, very sad tale, we had things like that, you see being the medical officer in the area one would get, there's another one where somebody dropped off a mountain and was killed as well. So we

⁹ Pentathol a trade name for sodium thiopental, a rapid onset short-acting barbiturate general anaesthetic.

¹⁰ col – the lowest point of a ridge or saddle between two peaks.

had that and it really was a question of maintaining morale as much as anything in these tragedies and there was a terrible loss of nerve of people on the base and so on.

[0:37:12] Lee: Was it a doctors' job to contribute towards the recovery of the psychology?

Orr: Oh yes, I think so, yes, what I found was disastrous, we'll go to more jolly things now but one day I was in my little tiny surgery and late at night and Ron Tindall the dog man came in, he was a great friend of mine here, he said 'What have you been laughing about? I'm just reading about the *Debunking of Tigger in Winnie-the-Poo.*' 'Good God' he said, I said 'Well listen to this' and I read and he thought it was hilarious. So I went into it, they said 'come and read it to the chaps' they were all in their bunks. We all slept 15 of us round the main room and I sat near the stove in the middle reading the *Debunking of Tigger* to all these rugged chaps and they thought this was hilariously funny and at moments of crisis like that it became the sort of tradition, like when we had a fire in the hut and we'd all cleared, and morale had dropped, I would be asked to go and read a *Winnie-the-Poo* story to them all [Laughs, unintelligible.] Life would go on; it became a sort of tradition really and in moments like that one would end up reading a Poo story or something.

[0:38:43] Lee: *The Debunking of Tigger* was a genuine Milne story or was that just a Fids name for it?

Orr: Oh no, no, it's genuine; you don't know your *Winnie-the-Poo*.

[0:38:53] Lee: I thought I did but I haven't come across that particular [unintelligible cross talk.]

Orr: I can tell you about it, anyway.

[0:38:59] Lee: Were you doing psychological studies on the men?

Orr: No, no, I don't, no.

[0:39:02] Lee: What were the psychological problems that came out then, apart from, in the wake of something disastrous?

Orr: I think you begin to realise that people, things made much more impression than they thought they ought to, and a lot of them were very rugged Lakeland or Scottish mountaineers and things but they found themselves against things that they really didn't, hadn't come across before. One or two really did all sorts things not to travel on the mainland because they got shit scared of crevasses. I was really, got very frightened of sea-ice and would do all they possibly could not to travel on the sea-ice. I began to realise these things and of course latterly the second year when I was base leader and mobilising them I was able to shift them around as appropriate which was very good from my point of view, seeing people coming up against their limitations which they often came as a surprise to them and they often wouldn't admit to, which one could see was happening and with one or two good friends on the base a one could discuss them and realise that this really was their problem or they would come to you and say 'I think really he's very frightened and doesn't want to do that so one would learn.

[0:40:40] Lee: This was the very genuine phobias were they?

Orr: Yes, well they, yes, you came against your limitations which you didn't like to admit as big strong outgoing chaps. You didn't like it so you thought of all sorts of reasons why you shouldn't do that, but really you were just frightened of the situation.

[0:40:58] Lee: So would they come to the doctor and say 'I'm sorry I don't want to do this'?

Orr: No,

[0:41:04] Lee: They'd just find excuses and not start?

Orr: Yeah.

[0:41:06] Lee: And you'd spot the string of excuses?

Orr: It wasn't as a doctor really but as a base leader, a leader was a chap who was playing with men but the doctor was just the sort of [unintelligible]. Psychology I hadn't done a lot of at Thomas's, psychology always happened on a Saturday morning and I was off training playing rugby somewhere. So I didn't do much psychology but I got to know about people quite a lot.

[0:41:36] Lee: Do these phobias arise from incidents of other people, other people down south, other people who knew somebody had gone down a crevasse and not come back?

Orr: Yes, it shook them, shook them quite a lot. We all had incidents, near incidents we talked about them a lot and I remember another one, I was travelling with Fritz Koerner up a glacier doing glaciology because as a doctor I travelled just to be a support to them and drive the dogs. We were sitting out a blizzard for a few days then got a bit bored with that and one of the things he used to do was to dig a snow hole until he got to the ice, and then he'd measured the ice and do all sorts of things, clever things to the ice. I said 'Well, I'll start digging a snow hole, so I went out into the blizzard and started digging a hole outside the base, outside the tent, and dug and dug and I got about six feet, I was well under, the blizzard was blowing above me and I was shovelling snow out. I shouted out 'Fritz,' I said [unintelligible] very steep sides. 'I'll push my ice-axe down and see if I can hit the ice and if I can't I'm going to give up.' So I was down there, six foot down, I said 'pass an ice-axe down' and so he passed it down and I shoved it down and the whole of the floor below me fell away, and I was digging down a crevasse bridge you see. I got out of there very quickly, and we were camping on a crevasse bridge. That's worrying stuff, I mean you don't feel totally secure anyway, you've got all that, just looking down on what fell away from me was quite daunting. So any sort of incident like that it just brought you up, things could happen.

[0:43:41] Lee: Do these results end in behavioural problems or just reluctance to do certain things?

Orr: A sort of reluctance to do certain things. I think if one hadn't been aware of it and had forced them into things they would have come out in a rash or whatever. But I think if you could see that this was a problem you could keep them away from that or support them in a way they wouldn't be too aware or sometimes it was responsibility they didn't like and so you put them with somebody who could take certain responsibilities for them.

[0:44:21] Lee: There were at times as many as fifteen bunks on this base.

Orr: Yes.

[0:44:26] Lee: I gather that at times there were more than fifteen people?

Orr: Yes, well the second year there were nineteen people, the first year there was fifteen. Nineteen people, we were never ever together on base at once and I think 50 percent of the time we out in the field. Being far enough north that we were able to travel the whole year round, the more rugged people further south in what they called the banana belt, and we could lay depots and things in the summer, in the winter, when the sea-ice was nice and firm you could travel great distances and was ideal for laying depots that you could then use in the summer. So we travelled the whole year round and we were in fact out off base but never, never all together on base at the same time and it's probably why we maintained the morale that we did and had such a very, very happy productive base. You would come back, tell your tales of derring-do, mend your sledges and plan your next thing and push off again. Most people liked, on a sledging base like ours, life was about being away out in the field, not sitting on our bums on base, which wasn't. There were one or two people who came, they thought they knew about everything, you know, the likes of an ex-marine I can think of particularly and he'd been everywhere and been down every crevasse, climbed every sort of mountain and he actually couldn't do anything. He could talk about it and he was very keen to drive my dog team. So I thought 'Well he's an ideal chap, here is a chap who is very experienced' and I started to teach him to take over my dog team, one day he tried to do just a little trip they were going to do just for a couple of days. I said 'well, you take it and we'll see how you get on.' They were beautifully trained dog team and within twenty four hours they were fighting, scratching, doing each other damage and the other chaps got back on the base and said 'You cannot have Dave [unintelligible], driving these dogs down. He tries to drive them as though they are on a parade square, the dogs have lost all confidence with everybody and I think they are going to do themselves a lot of damage. Which of course, was very bad for me and my relationship with the young man in question and I'm afraid he ended up at another base.

[0:47:07] Lee: Sounds like your team, what were they called?

Orr: They were called the Terrors, they are, there were, when I arrive there were 100 dogs on base which was 9, 10 teams. And all there were, were the four little puppies, there were also seven little puppies, 4 months each, another one was six months, and they really hadn't been put into any sort of training at all. At 4 months we tended to put them in their harnesses and train them with other dog teams, but there wasn't another dog team and this one, just six months was a very intelligent dog and so we just trained each other. I don't like dogs, I don't like domestic dogs and I wondered how I was going to cope with all this situation because I, domestic dogs here, particularly little ones sniff round your ankles and pee on our trousers and big ones shove their wet noses up your crutch and all that, they are not my scene at all.

[0:48:05] Lee: I concur, entirely.

Orr: When I realised that these were rather special and I threw myself into it, body and soul and we just, I drove them every single day, one or two of them, every single day while, unless it was blizzing so much you just couldn't take them out. I drove them every day and I drove them 3,500 miles so they taught me a lot and I taught myself a lot and I taught them so we just knew each other very, very well. They were called The Terrors in the beginning because they were, totally untrained, just they and me, and people like Don McCalman, who was base leader in that year was terrified that the whole thing was going to be a shambles. But it wasn't, it developed into a really super little team. Then we had all the discussions about centre trace and fan trace and that sort of thing which of course kept us occupied when we weren't talking about crevasses or what we were going to do with the loo paper when out and had a shit in the blizzard. Anyway I'm not going into all that, but there were certain things

that occupied our minds and I started to do mine on fan trace, it's what they do in the north, in the Arctic and Bill Sladen and people years ago, and the BGLE¹¹ who had been trained in the north ran their dogs on fan trace. It seemed to me to make a lot of sense that each dog is pulling on one separate bit of string on the sledge, and they are not pulling against each other against the centre trace, they are pulling individually. So I asked Don if I could develop this and he said well, with great reluctance he let me do it, and it obviously worked, as long as the dogs were well trained and by time we'd finished I think more than half the teams ran on fan trace. But it did mean you had to have somebody who knew how to drive dogs and the dogs were properly trained and they had confidence in you otherwise it could end up in a total maypole shambles. But that was the sort of thing that occupied one all the time.

[0:50:34] Lee: Apart from the occasion when you camped on the sea-ice because you had to, were you, did you take risks, or were you completely risk averse?

Orr: No, we took risks, oh no, but I can't remember any other, I can remember being pretty anxious and we weren't stupid, I mean if we went off travelling, went off anywhere we were always on a line or on a, you know. Initially we may have been a bit, I had an exciting time, we were really very careful and that's why one of the reasons that Hope Bay was well trained like that. If you went out to collect seals off ice-flows coming into the bay you always let the other people on the base know that you had taken a dinghy out, you always checked that the dinghy worked and the outboard worked and the spare outboard worked because if your outboard let you down and you were just taken over by the currents you were off to Elephant Island or somewhere and there's nothing anyone could do about it, so you were jolly careful. I do remember once taking some ice, sea-ice temperatures for Fritz Koerner who was the glaciologist I told you, but he was in the field and I went down with three of my dogs, down to the ice edge and was trying to take the ice temperature. It's about three foot down, from the ice edge down to the water and the penguins leap in and out but I couldn't quite reach it and there was a little ledge down there which I stupidly put my foot on the ledge, it gave way and I was in the water. Swimming around there with nothing but a bit of sheer ice in front of me for about three feet then, no ground to stand on and nothing to get, my dogs looking over the edge saying 'what the hell are you doing there, stupid place to be.' That was really rather frightening, but anyway I got out and raced up to base and poured myself a large gin or scotch I think.

[0:52:57] Lee: This is before the phrase Health and Safety came into popular usage, I guess that's what you were doing was it, assessing risks and so on?

Orr: Oh yes.

[0:53:04] Lee: Employing your own Health and Safety?

Orr: Oh yes, absolutely Health and bloody Safety. I mean you would, but you see there was things we learned, you learn by these mistakes and the things they learned you probably heard already about the fire in the other hut.

[0:53:23] Lee: No, I'm, yes.

¹¹ BGLE – British Graham Land Expedition 1934-1937. Bill Sladen was not a member of BGLE but was stationed at Hope Bay in 1948 where he was base M.O.

Orr: Oh, well the first hut at Hope Bay was a Nissen hut which is there still and about '45¹² some years, when BGLE, when Doctor Sladen, Sladen I think was the doctor. He was out in the penguin rookery doing some work on penguins, there was a big, big penguin rookery, Adelies. The rest of the team were in the field with their sledges except for two chaps who were in the base, the doctor looked back and saw the base was on fire and rushed back to the base but couldn't get the door open because the doors opened outwards and the door had drifted up, and two chaps died. Their crosses are still there, then the fire swept, the wind took it right across so it took all the anthracite and all the spares and all the stores. He had to live on, I don't know half of paraffin, a primus of paraffin or something and penguin blubber until the blokes got back from the field. So they learned, a) You don't have your doors going outwards, b) that you have your anthracite miles away or to leeward and the same for your survival things which were all higgeldy piggeldy and also up on the col so the thing didn't drift up in the same way. All this you learn from your own advice.

[0:55:13] Lee: And do you think these lessons were passed on from year to year to year so when you went down some years later you were warned about these [unintelligible cross talk.]

Orr: Yes, that's right and you tried to pass them on and not always were they received because we have another tale with a lot of marines who came off the *Protector* and I went on board the *Protector* and we met the marine officer and the Captain, he said 'They all want to go and climb mountains, they want to climb rocks. Where can they go?' I said well, I thought about it and I had a talk with the surveyors they said 'well the Mondor Glacier's¹³ the place to go,' although we've got lots and lots of climbers none of them liked climbing because of the rock was pretty unsafe and they were always busy doing something else. But anyway they arrived 'We'll come across and I showed them on the map where the Mondor Glacier was and it was about two hours away from base and there was only three of us on base, Ron Miller, Ron Tindal and I. They said 'well fly our Marines, two dozen of our marines are coming tomorrow, we'll fly them in helicopters and sure enough the next day, there they came, and they were all faffing around on the hillside and I said 'would you like us to come and give you a hand with our dog teams?' 'Good heavens no, we're Marines we all know about this sort of thing, good training for them, and we'll be off.' two hours later they were still faffing around. 'Are you sure you wouldn't like a hand?' 'Well I think we would, give us a lift round to the glacier.' Ron Tindal and I took our two teams up and left Ron Miller on his own I think and took them round to the Mondor Glacier. They put on all their man hauled sledges on behind and that towed along behind us. We got to the Mondor Glacier and it started to blizzard a bit so we said 'We'll not go back tonight.' always whenever we went out the team always had emergency supplies on. So we fed our dogs, we put out tent up and we got the kettle on and got the brew up going. There was a tremendous coming and going outside, all these chaps, and we looked out and we were the right hand man of nine tents all 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9 and then the officer. Our dogs were all lying down and we were just having our first brew and he came in and joined us, I said 'Is that sensible? You'll all drift up.' and he said 'No, no, no we always do things in an orderly way, it's the way we do things.' The next day, two days later, it was still blizzing and they were drifting up I must say. Poor Ron was on his own at base, I said 'We'll have to go back, we'll go back on a compass course.' So we took our tent down and on a compass course went back to base and arrived and then

¹² Correction- The date of the fire at Hope Bay was 1948, two base members lost their lives, Dick Burd and Mike Green, when the hut was totally burned trapping them both inside.

¹³ Mondor Glacier, 63°28'S 57°8'W a glacier 3.5miles(6Km) long flowing southwest from the head of the Depot glacier into Duse Bay, Trinity Peninsula.

got on with whatever we were doing. Oh, we were stripping the place down, we were going to replace the bathroom I remember, doing the plumbing. Two days later *Protector* came in the bay and said 'Where are our Marines?' Well I said 'on the Mondor Glacier' and they said 'well they're not you know, they've abandoned their camp.' We looked up the hill and there were coming down 4PT which was a big steep slope behind the base, were the Marines pulling very lightly, very light man haul sledges, certainly not laden and what had happened they had drifted up they'd had to cut themselves out of the tops of their tents. They'd abandoned all their equipment and just been able to dig their man haul sledges and they couldn't save their tents or anything, they just came back on their own. So they arrived on base and again the *Protector* had to go out because it was blizzing and it always blew very hard in Hope Bay. So the marines had a lovely time, we were very pleased to have them and there was a jolly sight more than 15 of them. A lot of them were plumbers and painters and decorators. They re-plumbed our loo and thought the whole thing was tremendous fun. I was cooking away like mad for these chaps and then we thought we'd better go and have a look at their camp when the blizzard settled down. So the Captain of Marines and Ron and I and our dog teams we went whizzing round to the Mondor Glacier and you could not see a vestige of a camp, you wouldn't have known one was there. It was totally, totally covered over and we never saw it again. They had to abandon all their equipment [Unintelligible] and they had to go back to their *Protector* with their tails between their legs and it wasn't a very much more happier state on base. A couple of things we were doing before, a terrific life we enjoyed that very much, but it's jolly hard work keeping them fed and watered I must say.

[1:00:49] Lee: A couple of final questions if I may, um, how was that three year spell in your life now rate in terms of life experience?

Orr: Right at the very top.

[1:01:02] Lee: Why would you say that, what was so special?

Orr: Well it was being your own person completely and not hampered by Health and bloody Safety or all the things we get now, and if things succeeded it was because you made them succeed. You were battling with probably one of the harshest environments in the world and enjoying it, it was a challenge you know and if you came up to beat that challenge it was very, very rewarding. I really can't think of anything more than that, it's just that you push yourself to the limits and found that you limits were quite a long way away.

[1:01:51] Lee: Were you a different man coming north to the one who went south?

Orr: I think I was but you know, nobody, they said 'very interesting, tell us all about' it and once you got about two minutes into the discussion you could see a thin veil came over their eyes. I lectured about it lots and young people enjoyed their lectures, and I'm doing another one in December. I love talking about it but actually talking to people, other than people like yourself, you've come here specially. I very rarely find they are frightfully interested, they are all very much more interested in themselves, just the same as we we're just interested in ourselves when our families had their yearly talk to us about Senior Week. I very much prefer to be out in the field than learning about the daffodils and fog in Hyde Park and all that.

[1:02:46] Lee: In what ways were you different in those two and a half years?

Orr: More confidence, I think. I just don't know, I just loved it, you were fulfilled, you could do things and push yourself to your limits, which I enjoy doing'

[1:03:12] Lee: Neil, thank you very much indeed.

Orr: A pleasure, if I've covered the ground enough for you.

ENDS

Possible Extracts.

- Early days in India, his father's profession. [0:00:00]
- To be a doctor, medical education in England. [0:01:19]
- Influenced by Edward Wilson of the Antarctic. [0:02:00]
- Expedition to the island of Socotra. [0:03:20]
- Joining FIDS, the psychology of the interview. [0:06:06]
- The nutrition of men and dogs. [0:07:15]
- A case of appendicitis. [0:17:35]
- A doctor on his own devices. [0:23:11]
- The Mercy Dash – to the rescue of Ian Hampton. [0:25:07]
- The positive influence of *Winnie-the-Poo*. [0:37:12]
- Sledging Fids and their phobias. [0:39:02]
- Training his dog team – The Terrors. [0:47:07]
- Risks and Health and Safety. [0:50:34]
- Call in the Marines! [0:55:13]
- Wrap up, a retrospective view of the Antarctic experience. [1:00:49]

ENDS