

Aitkenhead_Neil

Edited transcript of a recording of Neil Aitkenhead at the Hope Bay reunion in Coniston by Chris Eldon Lee on 21st October 2009, BAS archives AD6/24/1/55. Transcribed by David Price 22nd February 2014.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Neil Aitkenhead recorded at the Hope Bay reunion in Coniston by Chris Eldon Lee on 21st October 2009.

Aitkenhead: My name is Neil Aitkenhead and I was born in Newcastle upon Tyne.

[0:00:18] Lee: When?

Aitkenhead: In 1936. Do you want the exact date? 11th January 1936.

[0:00:24] Lee: Education Neil, what was your main place of education?

Aitkenhead: Well, I was, the main place of education was The Royal Grammar School at Newcastle having been to various, I was evacuated during the war, informally, to live with an auntie the middle of Northumberland. So I went to the village school to start with and also to a prep school before going to the Royal Grammar School.

[0:00:53] Lee: And university or?

Aitkenhead: I was at the local university as well I lived at home with mother and went to university locally in Newcastle, King's College which was then part of the University of Durham.

[0:01:08] Lee: You are a dyed in the wool Geordie are you?

Aitkenhead: Aye, aye man, aye, aye.

[0:01:12] Lee: You have to put the accent on don't you? You haven't got a natural Geordie accent.

Aitkenhead: Well some people detect a slight accent but yes, that's true.

[0:01:22] Lee: What was your brush with the Antarctic, either hearing about it or reading about it, what was your first memory?

Aitkenhead: Well at university, at King's College we had a member of staff in the Geography Department who had just come back from the Trans Antarctic Expedition. He was called Hal Lister and he was a glaciologist with Sir Vivian Fuchs on the Trans Antarctic Expedition, 1957 I think it was. He really was the person who encouraged me to apply and so on, but I had always fancied myself I think, shall we say, as a sort of polar explorer, you know I used to go out in the winter in the snow and tie a sledge to myself and plod off into the snow imagining I was being something.

[0:02:19] Lee: Can you remember where that inspiration came from, was it books or?

Aitkenhead: Um, I think it must have been books, yes, yes, I didn't personally know anybody at that stage who had been to the polar regions. I was the youngest of four children, I had two elder brothers but I don't think either of them inspired me particularly. I mean they took me out camping and encouraged me in the outdoor life but not necessarily polar.

[0:02:51] Lee: So the demise of Captain Scott didn't put you off then, you were happy to go and discover the South Pole in Northumberland?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes and then at university I joined the university Exploration Society and I also went off on expeditions with an organisation called the Braithwaite Exploration Group.

[0:03:14] Lee: Say again.

Aitkenhead: Braithwaite Exploration Group which was centred at Braithwaite Hall near Keswick in the Lake District. I went with them whilst, was it my first year at university or between school and university? I went with them to Norway and camped on the Jostedalbreen Ice Cap just north of Sognefjord in Norway and that was obviously all part of the process of getting to like that sort of life, yes.

[0:03:52] Lee: So you had some quite early training in coping with polar conditions?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes, I used to like climbing and modest rock climbing and climbing to the summits of the mountains, yes. Not just the rock climbing from the gymnastic point of view, so it followed on quite naturally from those experiences, yes.

[0:04:18] Lee: How did geology appear in your life?

Aitkenhead: Well one of my two brothers was a geologist so I knew what it was all about, obviously geology was something that takes you to the outdoors, well usually does and it seemed to be a subject with a life style I suppose, I imagined it would suit me very well. Again, I was able to study geology both at the sixth form in school and get an A level and at the local university. With the same teacher as it happened, the chap who, one of our lecturers at university also taught A levels at the school I went to.

[0:05:06] Lee: What was his name?

Aitkenhead: It was Douglas Robson, who was a bit of an eccentric character but uh.

[0:05:13] Lee: In what way?

Aitkenhead: Oh, in what way? He liked practical jokes and you never quite knew where you were with him because of his practical jokiness, but he was obviously an encouraging person.

[0:05:34] Lee: You applied to FIDS pretty much straight away after university didn't you?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes.

[0:05:39] Lee: That was always the grand plan?

Aitkenhead: Um, I think it must have been, yes. I can't really remember, apart from this chap Hal Lister at university actually meeting or knowing anybody who'd already been to FIDS, it was Hal Lister who was encouraging me to do that, yes.

[0:06:05] Lee: What do you recall of the interview process, was it rigorous, shall we say?

Aitkenhead: I thought it was remarkably easy actually. It didn't seem to be at all the difficult experience, as far as I can remember. You know I always felt they'd almost chosen me regardless of the interview, yes.

[0:06:29] Lee: Your name was already on the ship's passenger list was it?

Aitkenhead: I don't know about that but certainly it didn't seem to be a great obstacle, the interview.

[0:06:40] Lee: Do you recall who was on the interview panel?

Aitkenhead: Um, only by really thinking who was on it, you know obviously Adie was, Ray Adie was my boss when I joined and he was certainly on the interview panel as presumably was the man in charge of personnel at FIDS.

[0:07:02] Lee: This is Bill Sloman?

Aitkenhead: Bill Sloman, ah, that's a point, my brother happened to know Bill Sloman because he lived at Harpenden where my brother was working in the Ministry of Agriculture Plant Pathology labs so I already knew one of the key people I suppose you could say, in the organisation. If that was any advantage I don't know.

[0:07:27] Lee: I'm intrigued that they would choose graduates rather than experienced geologists do you have any idea, in retrospect why they were taking Freshers?

Aitkenhead: Um, no I don't, I think they presumably wanted people who didn't have too many home ties, although there was the odd married person was recruited. They must have chosen people who were unattached bachelors, I suppose they simply felt that we were keen and fresh, fit and fitted the bill in that way, yes.

[0:08:14] Lee: Were you aware of any psychological probing that went on to make sure that you were a stable chap?

Aitkenhead: Not aware of it, no, I'd read about the sort of interviews that other organisations do, particularly the Americans with their Rorschach ink blot tests¹ and these sort of things. But I was hardly aware of being probed really, as far as I can remember of the interview.

[0:08:44] Lee: It makes sense.

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes.

¹ Rorschach Test; a psychological test in which a person has to interpret what each of 10 ink blots might be.

[0:08:47] Lee: Was there much of a gap between being told you were going South and actually leaving?

Aitkenhead: Yes, we had a so called course at Birmingham University under Ray Adie and this course consisted of being sat at a table with the other new recruits, three or four of us in geology and being given a pile of polar books to read and we just spent week after week doing this.

[0:09:17] Lee: Reading?

Aitkenhead: Yes, reading or sleeping [Both laugh.] as a course it was a bit of a travesty really because shortly afterwards they decided to start giving people training in rope techniques and crevasse rescue. Practical important things like that, but in my day it wasn't the case.

[0:09:44] Lee: What did you make of Ray Adie; you must have come across him several times over your time?

Aitkenhead: Well, he was a rather difficult person in that he was very stiff upper lip, quite, not particularly approachable or easy to get on with. Mostly because, probably looking back because he himself was not particularly secure with the people he was in charge of.

[0:10:23] Lee: How do you mean?

Aitkenhead: Well, I think he was just, as I say he was rather difficult to get to know on a personal basis, he almost put himself on a pedestal I would say. But that was him, that was how we accepted him, he used to remind us a lot that Sir Vivian Fuchs was the boss and obviously he was very sort of subservient to Sir Vivian Fuchs or foxed subservience. Made Sir Vivian Fuchs to be a bit of a martinet I would say. That was, I suppose, was subsequently a term used for Sir Vivian Fuchs after the Trans Antarctic Expedition.

[0:11:25] Lee: Did you talk to him yourself, Fuchs?

Aitkenhead: Only very formally on a, that sort of basis, yes.

[0:11:32] Lee: So when you left for the Antarctic did you feel prepared, unprepared, marginally prepared.

Aitkenhead: I think marginally prepared, yes, simply through this lack of practical experience of the techniques one might be expected to use when we got there, but I think the system of one year, people going for two years, two winters and staying so that the people who came in had people who had already a year's experience to train them was quite a good system, looking back.

[0:12:24] Lee: Because?

Aitkenhead: Because we had these experienced people to show us the ropes and guide us in our techniques and so on, despite the lack of practicalities back home on this so called course before we left.

[0:12:44] Lee: So when you arrived was there an immediate training process down South or did you just pick things up as you went along?

Aitkenhead: You picked things up as you went along, yes.

[0:12:52] Lee: The trick was not to get killed in the first few weeks?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes that's right. I think we, my first sledge journey was spent, it seems now about ninety five percent lying in my sleeping bag in cloud and snow with Chris Brading who is with us this week, just waiting for Chris to be able to use his theodolite to sight onto the next trig point. So I read more novels in those six weeks than I have ever read before or since.

[0:13:41] Lee: Was that a disappointment then, when you got down there and found yourself enforced in laying up for such a long time?

Aitkenhead: I don't think it was disappointing, no I just accepted it as a fact of life, yes, yes. I don't think I had any particular expectations in that line.

[0:13:58] Lee: Had you been given a work brief or had you created your own?

Aitkenhead: I, the only briefing really was to map as much as possible as the weather and the circumstances permitted. It was very vague.

[0:14:19] Lee: So you weren't even pointed north, east, south or west you just?

Aitkenhead: No, you were given a blank map and told to fill in the geology, looking back, I can't remember those words being used obviously but that's in effect what it was, yes. We had some guidance in the area immediately around, Hope Bay had already been done and reconnaissance, a reconnaissance geological survey been done by sledge parties going down the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula. But it was just the main route south there was some bits of rock outcrop on that route that had rarely been visited. Nobody had sort of penetrated up the glaciers and looked at the rock exposures which were away from this highway down the Prince Gustav Channel so, yes, I was very lucky, looking back I was very lucky to get a bit of virgin country to geologically survey.

[0:15:32] Lee: So you were always treading where other men had trodden?

Aitkenhead: Absolutely, yes.

[0:15:36] Lee: A blank piece of paper can be a threat or an opportunity can't it?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes.

[0:15:41] Lee: Which way did you see it. You really are starting from scratch?

Aitkenhead: Well, the frustrations due to the weather was such that when an opportunity did come for looking at rocks and doing geology you were very, very pleased to take that opportunity and get on with it, so there was a sort of built in incentive to get on with it when the weather allowed you to, it rarely became irksome having to get up and out every day especially in the summer months when there was almost twenty four hours of daylight. So

one was entirely really one's own boss in terms of geological work being done, clearly it was the base leader's job to provide the back up in terms of personnel and dog teams which we then used. In other words, to organise things so that you could do the maximum amount of geological surveying, and on the whole that succeeded I think. It was just mainly this dreadful weather that was the big hindrance.

[0:17:03] Lee: So how did you decide in the end, what to do first? You had complete choice, what was your thinking about where to go first?

Aitkenhead: Well, I was really part of the process of learning how to do it, I mean learning how to dog sledge, camp and survive in that meant you went out with experienced people who were, in my case surveyors rather than geologists. So I was simply there as a companion and assistant to a surveyor to start with.

[0:17:33] Lee: So you were getting what geology you could?

Aitkenhead: Yes, which happened to be very little in fact, they were always wanting to be at the top of, the top of topographical bits of high ground which was usually enveloped in cloud and not much good from a geological point of view. So it was a bit frustrating from that point of view.

[0:17:56] Lee: Geologists prefer the bottoms of mountains rather than the tops?

Aitkenhead: Well they prefer places where they can see and get at the rocks, yes, and that is more often below the cloud base anyway and in terrain, well we have to travel in all sorts of terrain but normally we didn't take undue risks and go to places that offered, were too difficult from the access point of view.

[0:18:37] Lee: In that first year then you didn't have the clout to decide where you wanted to go, you didn't have sufficient clout as a new man to say I want to go a see such and such a spot?

Aitkenhead: Um, not on the first journey, no. but after that then I went where I felt where I had to go, yes.

[0:18:58] Lee: Once you had acquired the field skills then you'd pick up a GA?

Aitkenhead: Yes, that's right; the first journey was training and yes, in the techniques of Antarctic survival and so on. And then I, I mean one still had adapt to collaborate with others, people who were doing other things than geology, but more and more geology was the main purpose of the journeys and I was able to concentrate on that aspect.

[0:19:36] Lee: And you were 'the geologist' or was there more than one?

Aitkenhead: I was one of two, the other one was Phil Nelson and Phil and I got on quite well, we started out by being landed on the island of South Georgia as a sort of acclimatising trip for six weeks and that was a marvellous experience. South Georgia is a very, very scenic and interesting island with deep fjords and glaciers coming down into the fjords. It's what the west coast of Norway or even the west of Scotland must have looked like during the Ice-Age

and we had a very good six weeks there looking at geology and camping and tentatively putting our feet on the glaciers, that sort of thing. So that was a good start.

[0:20:42] Lee: So what kind of things were you coming up with when you got your hammer out to collect specimens, what were you finding?

Aitkenhead: Oh, you want some details of the actual geology [mixed up crosstalk, unintelligible.]

Yes, yes, yes. Well, on South Georgia the rocks are highly folded, thinly bedded rocks called Greywacke sandstone² and shales and it was really a matter of trying to work out the structure of these rocks. It was all, you know, very much new country sort of geology that I certainly hadn't encountered before. So it wasn't easy, but we did what we could.

[0:21:39] Lee: Sorry, did you analyse rocks at the time?

Aitkenhead: No, we just collected samples, yes.

[0:21:44] Lee: Were you able to do some sort of estimates as to what they might be?

Aitkenhead: Oh yes, we had sufficient knowledge to identify the rocks as a, and also knew the work of previous geologists who had been there, we weren't the first to work on South Georgia.

[0:22:04] Lee: Was there any surprises?

Aitkenhead: Um, I can't remember any surprises I must say, but there must have been.

[0:22:16] Lee: Fossils?

Aitkenhead: The fossils were disappointing; obviously that was one of our main searches to try and find fossils but we only found rather poor impressions of creatures in the rocks, no nice ammonites or anything like that.

[0:22:34] Lee: Was it different at Hope Bay, what was Hope Bay like?

Aitkenhead: Well, Hope Bay was if anything, the same, yes. Clearly there are on Mt. Flora, the very famous, world famous, fossil beds with these lovely, well preserved Jurassic plants in them but that has all been collected and done way back to start with, in 1903 I think. So that was not something we could do any original work in. In any case my job was to explore the ground well away from Hope Bay well to the south and see what was there. Of course it was this process of finding out what is there, which is the exciting thing.

[0:23:29] Lee: Again, what kind of things were you discovering?

Aitkenhead: Again, I was finding these highly folded sandstones and shales, sandstones called Greywackes but these were intruded by igneous rocks, by granites, and so there was

² Greywacke is a variety of sandstone generally characterised by its hardness, dark colour and poorly sorted angular grains of quartz, feldspar and lithic fragments set in a compact clay fine-matrix. It forms in the seas near fast-rising mountains.

always a variety of both igneous rocks and these sedimentary rocks, these highly folded sedimentary rocks rather than the granites. Offshore on James Ross Island there were much younger volcanic rocks but those were being studied by my companion, Phil Nelson, so we each had our own separate areas to work on and didn't really mix much as far as our work was concerned.

[0:24:29] Lee: So, any fossils found south of Hope Bay, any good finds?

Aitkenhead: No, as I say there were rather scrappy fossils that you could only just make out as being some sort of organic beastie but no, they were called trace fossils where there were traces of these creatures had made whilst burrowing in the sand, in the mud, but no actual remains of the creatures themselves in terms of a shell or a carapace or whatever. They were in the younger rocks which were mostly cropping out in the areas in which I wasn't; they'd already been looked at basically. So I had these rocks that were somewhat monotonous I have to say because we went on for outcrop after outcrop looking rather the same. But as I say, my job was to find out what was there, one never knew until one got to the outcrop what it was going to be.

[0:25:36] Lee: Did you come back and work on your samples back in the UK?

Aitkenhead: Yes.

[0:25:44] Lee: At Birmingham?

Aitkenhead: At Birmingham University, continuing under Ray Adie and we obviously examined the rocks and had thin sections cut and even sometimes chemical analyses. So I was able to write a FIDS Scientific Report on what I'd done and that was substantially also my PhD thesis, so I was very fortunate in having done enough work whilst in the Antarctic to enable me to get a PhD out of it which was very useful in my subsequent career with the British Geological Survey.

[0:26:27] Lee: Apart from a very nice PhD what was the, why was the work important, why was it important to know what was there?

Aitkenhead: Well that's a very profound question; I think it's a, well a). There just might be something of economic value there, it was a bit of territory after all that the United Kingdom claimed, but of course it was also territory that the Argentinians and the Chileans claimed, the same bit of ground. I think it was perhaps, in retrospect, just as well we didn't find anything that was of mineral value there because this would have inevitably increased the international tension and the dispute over the territory. So as it was, we found nothing of value so it was pure science, I suspect it was geology just to find out what was there and describe it.

[0:27:32] Lee: There was never any hints to you that, if you did find something worthwhile you should keep it under your hat?

Aitkenhead: Yes, oh yes I think we'd signed the Official Secrets Act I think before we went down there and so that was always the case that had we found anything of value it would have been... The Governor of the Falkland Islands would have been the first to hear about it I think.

[0:28:07] Lee: This territorial business, I presume, I mean, one or two of the Fids are suggesting or suggested that mapping it OK it was great to map the territory but actually by mapping the territory, geologically or geographically you were strengthening your claim?

Aitkenhead: Yes, I think that's probably true. Clearly, it was valuable to have an accurate topographical map of the territory you're claiming and if that has your country's stamp on it then it must add I think, to the validity of your claim, and geology likewise. The other bases, the Argentinians and Chileans, also had their geologists but we really didn't get the impression that their work, I suppose it was possibly national pride, quite matched our own. But in retrospect they did make a valuable contribution by doing bits of ground in much greater detail than a more reconnaissance type survey enabled us to do. I can't really quote chapter and verse on that.

[0:29:28] Lee: There was no working together?

Aitkenhead: Not physically, no, no. In fact I can't really remember a geologist as such; the Argentinian base which was near our base at Hope Bay was largely staffed by military personnel although of course they weren't allowed to carry out any military exercises because that was forbidden by the Antarctic Treaty³ which they were signatories to. But they were very much a military base with all the command structure and everything else that goes with it.

[0:30:09] Lee: Looking back at what you achieved in those two years⁴. Is it valuable, in retrospect; was it a valuable thing to do?

Aitkenhead: Not commercially valuable I don't think.

[0:30:21] Lee: But scientifically?

Aitkenhead: Scientifically yes, I think any knowledge of what rocks are in the earth's crust is scientifically valuable even if it is sort of proving a negative as it were, yes.

[0:30:40] Lee: Let's talk a bit more about the process of being in the field then, once you'd done your training trips being with Chris, you were let off, presumably with somebody else, you weren't going as one man?

Aitkenhead: You have probably heard that at Hope Bay, it was primarily a weather station.

[0:30:58] Lee: Well it was for a while wasn't it?

Aitkenhead: Six, I think with six meteorologists because they had to take readings every three hours all through the night and day even in the middle of winter. They decided that the weather at Hope Bay was so completely atypical of the region as a whole, you've probably heard this, that weather readings were of no value in giving the regional picture. So all these meteorologists were made redundant as meteorologists and turned into General Assistants, dog drivers, much to their delight of course. It was far nicer going out in the field and driving

³ Antarctic Treaty: This was finally ratified on 23 June 1961.

⁴ The interviewee spent the seasons 1960 and 1961 at Hope Bay.

a dog team than sitting on base taking weather readings every three hours. So we had a very happy and satisfied bunch of ex-meteorologists to accompany one.

[0:31:54] Lee: So you were never short of trail companions?

Aitkenhead: That's right, yes,

[0:32:01] Lee: Talk me through a classical geological survey or geological trip.

Aitkenhead: Right well, we usually had to travel for a day or two before we got to the area I was going to geologically survey, so there was always that trip across the Peninsula⁵ to the Prince Gustav Channel which was a nice limbering up exercise if you like, got you a bit fitter, and acclimatised to camping and so on before reaching the area where the geological work was going to start. Then we'd find a suitable site as near as possible to the outcrops that I was going to examine and that was sometimes a bit tricky because finding sheltered camp sites which are not prone to difficult crevasse conditions or sea-ice breaking up and floating away and that sort of thing. It was always somewhat reliant on the experience of the people we were travelling with, especially in my first year of course. We'd find a suitable spot to pitch a tent which I would suggest was an area where I could easily go out with an empty sledge during the day and do my work and come back to in the evening, perhaps spending two or three weeks at such a site. Of course we always took a small pup tent as we called it, our sleeping bags and emergency rations in case we were trapped away from our main tent and this did happen on one or two occasions. So that was the general picture, I worked from these temporary tents; temporary camps and then moved on when I had finished mapping a given area.

[0:34:24] Lee: So you had one tent which was your base tent?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes.

[0:34:28] Lee: And did the GA stay there or did he come with you?

Aitkenhead: He really came with me, yes.

[0:34:31] Lee: And the other satellite tent?

Aitkenhead: It was always important to have two people often sometimes three because if you had two sledges then if one sledge went down a crevasse there was the other one to pull you out. And as I was working in all sorts of inland terrain not just the easy and safe terrain it was quite important to two sledges usually, and on one or two occasions that proved necessary. But on the sea-ice, which I did to start with I think I was just accompanying a surveyor, I can't remember why I was on the sea-ice, certainly that was one of the more frightening experiences of my sledging career.

[0:35:25] Lee: Would you like to elaborate?

⁵ Across the Tabarin Peninsula down into Duse Bay and View Point 63°32'S, 57° 24'W where FIDS established a refuge hut in 1953, enlarged it in during 1955, a new hut was erected in 1956. It was a jumping off point for journey's further south.

Aitkenhead: Well we camped on this sea-ice in between some of the islands in the Gustav Channel and I was aware that some ten, fifteen miles away there was open water and I was also aware that sea-ice was fragile and could break up if a big swell got up out at sea or if a wind got up and in the middle of the night your camping there and the wind gets up you begin to imagine the worst, sort of thing. It's quite difficult to control ones fears I found in those circumstances and not say 'we'd better get out of here quick' but of course the people you're with were used to this sort of situation had long ago learnt to suppress these fears or didn't actually hold those fears. So, that was an early experience of camping.

[0:36:33] Lee: Why were you camping on the sea-ice in the first place, I thought that was a cardinal sin?

Aitkenhead: I think it was because we were amongst these islands where they dropped sheer into the sea; there was very little space to pitch a tent. I suppose it's always, it's also the fact that these people were pretty confident that the sea-ice was really fast as it was there for many months and wouldn't break up and go out. I know in one case we were only within, we camped because we couldn't get ashore because the tide was out, the sea-ice of course goes up and down with the tide like the floor of a lift, and when the tide was out you've got this cliff of ice between you and the land and its often very difficult to climb up this cliff with a heavily laden dog sledge and so on. It requires ice climbing and so on so we often found it easier to camp on the sea-ice, wait for the tide to rise until we could easily get ashore onto the land.

[0:37:55] Lee: You are talking about several feet are you?

Aitkenhead: Yes, oh yes, about four or five feet.

[0:38:02] Lee: So camping on sea-ice was common practice in the late fifties, early sixties?

Aitkenhead: Yes, I think so.

[0:38:09] Lee: It went out of fashion after the Horseshoe catastrophe⁶?

Aitkenhead: We always felt that our sea-ice was a lot safer than over on the west coast where it was open to the South Atlantic swell really. Whereas we were very sheltered amongst the James Ross Island and the other islands and its swell that tends to break up sea-ice and cause it to be dangerous and our sea-ice tended not to be effected by that. So I don't think we were being too foolhardy in camping on sea-ice.

[0:38:46] Lee: Were risks taken seriously in those days and Health and Safety discussed at length?

Aitkenhead: Well, the term Health and Safety hadn't appeared in anybody's vocabulary then.

[0:38:57] Lee: It was common sense?

⁶ This is a reference to the events of 28 June 1958 at Horseshoe Island Base Y when three men were caught out sledging on the sea-ice in a storm; they were never seen again, although some of the dogs eventually turned up.

Aitkenhead: Yes, but obviously we were aware of risks, yes, we... particularly falling down crevasses I think was the risk that most of us appreciated and of course for this reason we always used to have a rope attached to the handlebars of the sledge so that, the sledge of course had the load evenly distributed would be far less likely to be, to go down a crevasse than somebody going along running behind the sledge. It was quite common for, when travelling up glaciers, for people to put their foot through a crevasse or even both feet and just haul themselves out by clinging to the back of the sledge or being pulled out by this rope attached to the sledge.

[0:39:47] Lee: So crevasses, generally speaking, were not as wide as a sledge is long, they were narrower than a sledge?

Aitkenhead: Generally the dangerous ones were, there were some that were wider than the sledge but they usually had very large, slightly sagging snow bridges which um, and where the only hole, if you like, was at the very edge. We used to probe these things before crossing them, probing with our ice-axe just to re-assure ourselves that it was probably safe to cross, but in extreme cases we would go across and attach a rope and make sure that if the sledge did break through it was attached by a rope to somebody. Mostly we relied on the fact that the sledge would, the dogs of course are out in front so they were the first to go down if the crevasse bridge is unsafe. Quite a few times we had to pull the dogs out of crevasses.

[0:40:59] Lee: You never went down yourself, fell down one yourself?

Aitkenhead: No, I put my legs through once or twice but never my whole body.

[0:41:08] Lee: There was of course the famous event in which Ian Hampton was injured, I don't think you were on the spot at the time were you?

Aitkenhead: I wasn't on the spot but I was on base, I was at a place called View Point which was one of the subsidiary huts so I was very much involved in passing messages backwards and forwards from Neil Orr, the doctor and base leader who was upon a faraway glacier and it was imperative to get a message to him and to get him to come and attend to Ian.

[0:41:42] Lee: Can you talk me through the incident from your viewpoint then, your viewpoint at View Point? [Both laugh]

Aitkenhead: Obviously we heard it all on the radio, we were anxious to help find Neil Orr and to get a message to him. I think we went out, to search for him, I'm not too clear in my memory about this, for Neil Orr, yes.

[0:42:14] Lee: A search party was sent?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes and when he eventually got to View Point we were able to help him on his way further down the Channel. I remember one of the embarrassing things was that, this is a story that was against myself, was that I sent him off, I told him what the compass bearing was to set off down the Channel, because it was pretty manky,⁷ very foggy at times and to my great shame when I told him this compass bearing instead of subtracting the magnetic variation I added it which meant he was about twenty degrees off course. had he

⁷ manky: a Fids term for poor visibility.

taken any notice of my compass bearing, but fortunately, and it would have taken them into a nasty bit of flooded sea-ice in fact, which would have been a bit dangerous but I think fortunately he relied upon his own guidance where he went. It was a, looking back I was a bit horrified at this mistake I'd made.

[0:43:34] Lee: how did you realise that you'd made this mistake?

Aitkenhead: I think pretty soon after he'd gone, yes.

[0:43:42] Lee: So there was no question of chasing after him?

Aitkenhead : I think we did actually, yes, I think we did but failed to catch up with him or find him.

[0:43:54] Lee: Did you listen to the radio whilst all this was going on?

Aitkenhead : Yes.

[0:44:02] Lee: Was there, amongst the Hope Bay team, at that point, was there a real fear that Ian would not come back?

Aitkenhead : I don't think we were aware of that extreme. No, I think we realised that he'd been injured but was able to communicate and it was really a matter of it was encouraging to know that the doctor was on his way so I think one accepted that.

[0:44:40] Lee: You were confident?

Aitkenhead: Yes.

[0:44:41] Lee: It was a sense of confidence?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes.

[0:44:46] Lee: How was he when you saw him, Ian?

Aitkenhead: I think he was in a pretty poor state, yes, clearly he'd had this injury to his scalp which required all these stitches. As far as I can remember he was grinning and bearing it which was encouraging, but it's always a nasty moment when ones companions get injured like that.

[0:45:17] Lee: He required an x-ray didn't he, and the extra base didn't have an x-ray machine?

Aitkenhead: So he was taken down to the Argentinian base, I think, or was he taken on to a ship?

[0:45:29] Lee: No, it was the Argentinian base.

Aitkenhead: It was the Argentinian base.

[0:45:31] Lee: You didn't go with him?

Aitkenhead: No, no. If you remember I was the next year after Ian so I wasn't one of his contemporaries who were obviously were at the forefront looking after him.

[0:45:49] Lee: Did you have any medical problems yourself?

Aitkenhead: No, not really, nothing.

[0:45:55] Lee: A septic toe?

Aitkenhead: Is that in the record?

[0:46:01] Lee: You must have said it to Amanda⁸.

Aitkenhead: Oh, right. Yes, well, there we are. I seem to remember having, on base, having to have penicillin injections in my bum but which was presumably for that incapacity, yes. But otherwise I was pretty fit fortunately.

[0: 46:28] Lee: How did you cope with the layups in the manky weather then, you had books to read but books are ok for a while, were there other things you could do to pass the time?

Aitkenhead: Well this is where I must take my hat off to the people I was with who were almost invariably good companions and sometimes very good talkers. I'm not much of a talker myself but some people I remember were, had endless amusing anecdotes to tell, very good companions from that point of view. John Winham, for example, who I'd known in Newcastle before I went down, he was an old friend as well as a companion there.

[0:47:15] Lee: Was that sheer coincidence or had you applied together?

Aitkenhead: No, sheer coincidence, yes.

[0:47:24] Lee: Did you listen to Spanish radio?

Aitkenhead: Yes, we tuned into anything we could easily pick up on the old 68⁹ sets which weren't much use really.

[0:47:37] Lee: 68 sets?

Aitkenhead: Yes.

[0:47:39] Lee: What are they?

Aitkenhead: Well they are a big ex-army radio set, hot valves and quite unlike anything that's used these days. Very heavy to carry and not reliable at all, the hot valve used to freeze up and not work basically. So we could, I suppose about half the time we could use them to

⁸ Amanda Lynnes: Project co-ordinator for the Oral History Project.

⁹ 68 sets: Old ex-Army battery powered radio transceivers usually used for communications by sledging teams in the field; use was limited by battery capacity.

communicate, usually by Morse code and on rare occasions we could actually speak to base with them. They weren't very good radios at all.

[0:48:26] Lee: But you could pick up Spanish stations?

Aitkenhead: Yes.

[0:48:29] Lee: that was South America wasn't it?

Aitkenhead: Yes, we used to twiddle about with the knobs and eventually find one or two Spanish stations from South America, yes. Usually commercial radio of course, we also picked up South African radio which was usually a bit more interesting because it played more familiar tunes and things and give news of the English speaking world, shall we say. On rare occasions pick up BBC Overseas, of course that was a real bonus when we could do that. We were always trying to do this but not often succeeding.

[0:49:14] Lee: Did you acquire any Spanish?

Aitkenhead: No, not just the odd word. I think some people were good at acquiring, well, good at languages and they made a point of mixing more with the Argentinians and learning Spanish and enjoying communicating with them, trying their Spanish out by speaking with the Argentinians. But I was usually too involved with my field work and to see any need to do that.

[0:49:56] Lee: So you didn't spend much time yourself fraternising with them?

Aitkenhead: No.

[0:50:00] Lee: The Argentinians on base?

Aitkenhead: No, no, but I enjoyed the parties we occasionally had down there and occasions where they came up and joined us. Yes, it was a very good relationship between the two bases, there was very little of the sort of animosity that had been there in the past.

[0:50:30] Lee: Looking back now with almost fifty years hindsight how did that period in your life rate compared to the rest of your life?

Aitkenhead: Oh I think it was an experience which I would always be extremely grateful to have had, I think I was very lucky in being able to have that experience. It was the high point of my life, my career, there's no doubt about it, yes. The rest of my career has been I suppose, spent in Britain so it was...

[0:51:10] Lee: Would you stay with the British Geological...

Aitkenhead: Survey.

[0:51:13] Lee: Did you ever do anything quite as exciting as that ever again?

Aitkenhead: No, no I was interested in the geology I was doing in the Peak District, I was very lucky in that when I joined the BGS that they'd finished geologically surveying all the

urban areas and all the big industrial conurbations and so on and they were starting to spread out into more remote but much pleasanter areas of the country such as the Peak District which was where I was to do most of my work, and North Lancashire as well so again I was very lucky in that part of my career as well as the Antarctic bit at the beginning.

[0:52:01] Lee: I'm just wondering about it because several chaps have said this, I'm just wondering about what it's like to have the most exciting part of your life at the beginning of one's life, if you like, this is like a Neil Armstrong moment isn't it, what do you do when you come back from the moon?

Aitkenhead: Yes, yes, yes. Well I didn't make sort of invidious comparisons as to the life I was leading subsequent to my life in the Antarctic experience. I was always able to go on holiday to mountainous areas if I felt like it, we bought a, my wife and I bought a timeshare at a ski resort in the Alps so I always got my, at least a week in the snow and ice in the Alps in winter.

[0:52:53] Lee: No penguins.

Aitkenhead: No, but that was a, you know, a little bit of a lingering substitute for the snow and ice of my early experience and we still enjoy that.

[0:53:08] Lee: So the Antarctic experience was a great line on your CV and did it help your career do you think?

Aitkenhead: Well, it's difficult for me to say that, I certainly didn't seem to have any problems with getting the next job after the Antarctic job, and in doing my subsequent work, so it must have been a help in that respect rather than something that didn't matter.

[0:53:42] Lee: Have you been South since?

Aitkenhead: No, I always felt that 'I'd been there and done that' as far as going South was concerned. I think if somebody offered me a free trip I would take it up immediately but I feel that's there so much more of the world to see and I've only seen a very small part of it even now. So I don't feel I could repeat the wonderful experience I'd had when I did go down.

ENDS.

Possible Extracts.

- First awareness of Antarctica. [0:01:22]
- Early days in an outdoor life. [0:02:51]
- Geology at school and university. [0:04:18]
- Joining FIDS, the interview process. [0:05:34]
- Observations on Ray Adie. [0:09:44]
- Preparation and training for field work. [0:11:32]
- The geology brief. [0:13:58]
- Geology versus the weather. [0:17:35]

- Discussion on rock formations. [0:20:42]
- Fossils; or the lack of. [0:22:16]
- National importance of geology and the Official Secrets Act. [0:26:23]
- A typical geology field trip. [0:32:01]
- The dangers of camping on sea-ice. [0:35:23]
- The dangers of crevasses. [0:38:46]
- Personal medical problems. [0:45:49]
- On being a good companion. [0:46:28]
- A life after FIDS, a career with the British Geological Survey. [0:51:13]

ENDS.