

## John Cole.

**Interviewed by Jack Tolson at home in West Wellow, Hampshire on 7th May, 2010. BAS Archives AD6.24.1.72.1. Transcribed by Neil MacPherson on 15.03.2019.**

Cole: Well, I was born on the 12th of April 1935 in Herne Bay in Kent and went to the local infant school and junior school, then went to Simon Langton Grammar School in Canterbury. I left there early at the age of 15 to go to the Worcester training for the Merchant Navy. I have no idea what gave me the idea that I wanted to go in the Merchant Navy but once having come up with the idea and gone to the training ship, I was quite happy.

(0:01:07 ) Tolson: Did you have brothers or sisters?

Cole: Yes, I had one sister, she was five years older than me. She went to the same schools as I did but at the time the Grammar school was never in the same building because it was bombed during the war and the girls' school is quite a way away from the boys' school, which was only half there because it was bombed, I suppose. The girls' school had a brand new school eventually long before the boys ever had one. The school was in the middle of Canterbury and it was flattened all round.

(0:02:03 ) Tolson: Parents, what was your father doing?

Cole: My father was a school teacher. He did that till he retired in Herne Bay. At the same school for years and years, part of the furniture there.

(0:02:25 ) Tolson: So you've got absolutely no idea what it was that took you to sea school?

Cole: None whatsoever. It seemed a good idea at the time.

(0:02:39 ) Tolson: And having got there, tell me a little bit about your time, what you studied and how long you were studying there for?

Cole: Well, it was two-year course when I was there, fortunately. It turned into three years shortly after I left. It was just general education and they helped you find a shipping company at the end of it. I did go on one sea trip during the holidays of ... you know, we were on summer leave. Went on a general steam navigation ship, *The Stork*. It went up the Rhine to Cologne. It was a bit of experience. There were two of us as cadets on there just for the trip. It was quite an interesting little jaunt.

(0:03:39 ) Tolson: It convinced you of your future at sea that this was definitely the right ....?

Cole: [Laughs] I don't think I necessarily felt along those lines. I was just (going to) do it and that was it. I was there and I couldn't see what else I was going to do probably.

(0:04:02) Tolson: Tell me about the latter stages at Worcester then. Presumably at some stage you had to start looking for a shipping company. Did you have any recollections of trying to find a company or a company coming to you? Interviews?

Cole: I don't remember how it came about. You tended to choose, from what I recall you chose a company. I chose Ellerman Lines because they went to a lot of places around the world. There were a lot of companies that I wouldn't have gone with, the likes of Palm Line or Elder Dempster that spent most of their time in West Africa. That didn't appeal to me greatly. I suppose I've never been a great lover of hot weather, or hot and sticky which I imagined West Africa was. So I applied to them. I think you did it from the Worcester. I think they probably put your application through, but I'm sure there must have been an interview and I managed to get with Ellermans. My first trip to sea was 1950's sometime on a ship called the *City of Bath*. It's a ship they'd taken over from Medimslee [phonetic] Shipping Company, a Dutch concern and we joined it in Hamburg. It wasn't the normal run of the mill for Ellerman's because it had a white crew, whereas every other shipping line had Indian crew. We had six cadets on board which made a useful working party and there was a lot of work to do because it was in quite a state when we took it over.

(0: 06:35 ) Tolson: In those days as a cadet, what did being a cadet on a ship entail? Was there a lot of chipping and scraping or did you get to do watch-keeping?

Cole: Watch-keeping, what was that? [laughs]. No, no just chipping and painting. The nearest you got to the bridge was scrubbing the chartroom floor. I don't think we did used to get near the bridge all that much. I can't remember going in and out of port being on the bridge on that ship. Again, we made a useful team to man a rope, three each end. It was a good trip, it was ten months long and went to the States, Australia, back to the States, down to Trinidad, down to South Africa, up the east coast of Africa, through Suez and home. Interesting at Trinidad, we moored near the pitch lake there. That was what we went for, their tar but it was a general, really good trip and I think the ship arrived back with about half the original white crew on board. Many changes during the trip.

(0:08:28 ) Tolson: So your apprenticeship continued in a similar vein - different ships but working very much on deck as opposed to navigation and wheelhouse work, more or less?

Cole: No, the other ships, the next ships I went on were .... you used to spend a bit more time on the bridge, similar work but you weren't a working gang, you were generally just two cadets and that didn't really constitute a work party. You did get more training then. One of the cadets on the first trip was Jim Martin who was how I got into FIDS really.

(0:09:34 ) Tolson: So after your apprenticeship you took Second Mate's and did you then go into FIDS?

Cole: No, I was Third Mate then Second Mate with Ellermans and I did two long trips and seemed to get stuck in running to India which I wasn't very enthusiastic about, to say the least, and I just happened to be passing one leave. I was up for Master's, I think it was . Or I was on leave to go for Master's but it was the term for College didn't start for some time, so I had a bit of spare time and I was going down to Bournemouth for some reason or other and knew that Jim Martin was in Southampton, so I looked in on him and saw the ships and saw their slides and told how things worked there. He said he thought there was a job going, so I thought I'd had enough of running to India and hot weather and maybe give it a go, so I applied and got the job as the Third Mate on the *Biscoe*. That was in 1960.

(0:11:32 ) Tolson: Do you have any recollections of that interview? Where it was and who it was with?

Cole: I don't remember who it was with. I'm sure Bill Johnson must have been there but I can't recall who did the interview at all. It was at a Crown Agents' place. I think it was near Victoria. I don't think it was in Crown Agents itself, 4 Millbank, although there were a lot of things were done there. I'm just not too sure about that.

(0:12:21 ) Tolson: So you started on the *Biscoe*, on the *John Biscoe*, the new *John Biscoe* of course.

Cole: Yeah.

(0:12:33 ) Tolson: What were your first impressions. You'd been on a large Ellermans ship weeks before probably and now you come to join the *John Biscoe*?

Cole: I just thought it was different, it would be interesting, even exciting I suppose, and well I think it was.

(0:12:57 ) Tolson: Size?

Cole: The size, yes, I mean you go to the end of the jetty or end of the quay and you wonder where the ship is, but other than that I wouldn't say I enjoyed the first day out 'cos we went straight out into a bit of a hoolie and wasn't used to bouncing around quite the way the *Biscoe* did. But having got over that, fine, it was good to .... you know, it's just a totally different way of life from your average ship, certainly when you get South.

(0:13:45 ) Tolson: But the first impressions that you perhaps recall of those first few weeks, a totally different lifestyle, you were loading a ship, scientists were coming on board, all fairly strange and rather a new look on marine life.

Cole: Yes, it was an added interest. You had all these Fids on board, all from different walks of life and going down there to do different things. Yeah, talking to them, it was just fascinating, I suppose. In those days anyone that was going down South the only way was on the ship so you were all together for a long period of time and it was interesting to find out about them. Some of them had been down there previously so they were able to tell you things.

(0:15:14 ) Tolson: Third Mate, was that the job as you knew it from commercial shipping?

Cole: At sea it was just the same really. Not all ships I'd been on had been Met ships. The scientific side was a bit more important with FIDS. Other than that, it was just the same. You'd lifeboats to look after and you did the same things that you do on any ship. Navigation's the same.

(0:16:06 ) Tolson: When did it all suddenly change and you realised that this was actually an expedition ship and it was something of a very much larger adventure?

Cole: Well, as soon as you get to Stanley, I suppose, because when you arrive there and as you're coming in and going alongside the whole of or half of Stanley on the jetty to greet the ship because, other than the *Darwin* once a month from Montevideo, we were the main mail route. They were keen to get their mail and, having mainly Falkland Islands crew as well, they were keen to see their sons and daughters and boyfriends, I suppose. And Stanley itself was an eye-opener in those days. It's a bit sort of remote, you could say, but it was a friendly place. You arrive there, there's no pick up a pilot. That's different from the average Merchant Navy. There's no sort of ceremony or anything like that, you just go in, go alongside and when you get there there's no stevedores, so then your job changes a bit. You're in charge of the Fids in the hatch or on the jetty discharging and loading to go South. That hands on stuff was good, it was quite enjoyable.

(0:18:13 ) Tolson: In those days in the 50's and 60's, where did you get your Antarctic clothing from? Where did you actually get set up ready to go south?

Cole: That was all in Stanley. There was a fellow by the name of Johnny Browning who worked under Clem, Ray Clements. They had their store just up the top of the jetty, public jetty, and everyone used to go up there and get kitted out. I think we used to get a pair of jeans and windproofs. If you got a pair of jeans and they were too long, if you complained about them they just cut the bottoms off [laughs].

(0:19:10 ) Tolson: From a supply point of view Stanley was .... everything had come down to Port Stanley and then from there it was put on to the *John Biscoe*, the stores where the new base was going to be, the new hut was going to be put up and the food and the clothing, was that brought down on the ship already with you?

Cole: Yes, I mean they'd probably work a year in arrears. They'd have gear for us. They had quite a big store there of clothing but each year we would bring stuff down for Stanley. There'd be quite a bit and then I mean timber used to be put into the store at Stanley and when it was required at bases you'd reload what was required. There was always quite a bit of cargo both ways, not just into Stanley, and you'd have to load sand and gravel and cement. There'd be a store in Stanley for top-ups if things ran out. You'd bring it down from the UK for known projects but there were always other bits and pieces to be shipped to and fro in Stanley.

(0:20:57 ) Tolson: So you've now arrived in Stanley, you've loaded up for the Antarctic and you're heading south on your first voyage and this really is the big adventure starting for you, do things change now ? Do you become much more aware of Antarctica?

Cole: Well you do with a certain amount of trepidation because it's a just total new experience. You have no idea about ice at all and you're clueless as to what bits of ice are worth avoiding and what aren't, but you're not really given that choice anyway because as soon as it's choices, the Captain's on the bridge anyway. Your first iceberg you don't know really how they work until you've seen them. It's all just amazing, you're learning. Well, you learn fast. It's an exciting experience when you first start meeting ice and once you get towards pack ice or where you've got a lot of small bits floating around on your first trip you have got a fairly good eye kept on you to make sure you know what's going on before you're left on your own too much. In those days it didn't do a lot of steaming at night which nowadays you do.

(0:23:12 ) Tolson: You were presumably heading for, widely, the Peninsula bases.

Cole: Yes, I think probably Hope Bay was the first one.

(0:23:29 ) Tolson: Can you give me flavour if what bases were like in those days? I don't mean necessarily your first trip but certainly your early impressions of what you saw as you approached from a few miles off?

Cole: Well you didn't see a lot because you see a hut and you don't know much about it. It's when you first go ashore, the first time you go ashore with the cargo in a scow. I mean that was another experience. Scow, what's that? Didn't really know till we started using them. You go ashore and while you're waiting for another scow to come back you wander up to the base hut and see all these people that have been living there for a year and you think: 'Not sure how'. Yes, not sure whether I'd be keen on this but being on the ship doesn't affect you that way. But it's all interesting and just another way of life. I just quite enjoyed every part of being down there.

(0:25:06 ) Tolson: The bases themselves, you say they were just small huts, but what was going on largely in a base community? What sort of work were they doing?

Cole: Well Hope Bay was mainly a sledging base for down the Peninsula. They probably had Met observations but I don't think they did much else. They probably had geologists there for down the Peninsula.

(0:25:46 ) Tolson: A lot of dogs as well?

Cole: Oh yes, yes. We used to carry dogs between bases which was never a popular thing on board because they'd be chained up outside your cabin and well when you're on watches you'd turn in early and then some Fids go around stroking the dogs and the dogs all start howling and chains rattling. Keeps you awake, so you're quite pleased when they get off at the next base or wherever they're supposed to go.

(0:26:29 ) Tolson: One of the jobs that the *Biscoe* had to do was to go sealing, wasn't it, for a supply of dog food?

Cole: Yes.

(0:26:40 ) Tolson: Can you tell me about that procedure?

Cole: Well the bosun had two or three people that had rifles, restricted to them doing any of the shooting. You'd land them on the ice where the seal were. They'd shoot the seals what they could get and then a party would go in and gut them and they'd be dragged back to the boat to get them back on board, heave them on board. We'd be picking up two or three hundred of them maybe. It

was easier when you did it if you found fast ice with a whole load of seals on. The rifles would go, shoot what they could and then other people would go on to the ice and drag them back to the ship. You'd be able to stick its bow into the ice and just sit there and wait until the seals that were available were dragged back and hoist them on board and move on somewhere else. Used to spend quite a bit of time getting these seals. It was easier getting them from fast ice than floes. That would be put the boat over, send them out, send it out, shoot them and then the people would get out of the boat to tie them so that they could be towed back to the ship. But it was all part of a day's work. Whatever you did down there in those early days you would find somewhere to anchor at night then start the next day, which was a lot simpler than ... well just different. You just couldn't keep going in the same way that you keep going now because everybody's working during the day and you couldn't work all day and do your watch at night. You were just needed through the work that you did.

(0:29:27) Tolson: John, you had in the early days ships were not quite so (a) powerful and (b) steel-plating not as thick. What encounters did you have with pack ice and how did that affect your operations?

Cole: I think it was probably on my first trip, certainly one of the early ones on the *Biscoe*. We were going down to Adelaide Island to set up the base down there, we had the base on board. Got part way down the coast of Adelaide Island and came across pack ice. That was my first real experience of pack ice. There wasn't so much, there was just mainly bergs and bergy bits before that. As I say we got half way down, entered the pack ice and came to a grinding halt after very few miles and, well, there we stayed for quite a while. I'm not sure, we did have a film, something 'So Many Days to Peking'. I can't remember whether it was 21 or 42 or whatever it was but we were beginning to think we were like that because most days we'd start up and try and get a bit further down but it was quite an impossible task to begin with, you couldn't move anywhere.. So just shut down. Generally start up after breakfast and before lunch we'd be stopped again, moving nowhere really. So we had a lot of spare time. There was not a lot of point keeping watches on the bridge or anything like that, so it was then that we had lots of spare time and it was then that I learned to play bridge. Never played any since. Another game we played was - we had pilots on board - another game we learned was 'Clagg' which apparently they play when the weather is 'claggy', so that was quite a good game. I can't remember how you played it now even. Not that I can remember how to play bridge exactly but it would come back to me quickly enough I think.

(0:32:52) Tolson: Eventually you did manage to get through the ice or the ice broke up allowing you to get through. Where were you heading? This was a new base that you were planning to build?

Cole: Yes, it was. I suspect, I can't really remember. It was going to be up the Laubeuf Fjord. I think it was probably going to be where Rothera is now. But eventually got into Marguerite Bay and it was quite clear around the south end once you got through the pack and we then headed north up the fjord but there was fast ice there and, after maybe four or five days trying to break that to get further up, I think it was decided it wasn't on, so headed back round the south end of Adelaide Island and that was when we found a little place to anchor off this marvelous Base 'T' which was called 'Adelaide Island' A nice little landing and it was reasonably easy to get everything ashore there. The hut was built while we were down there and we probably went across to Stonington and Horseshoe Island later in the season. And that was the beginning of Base 'T'. It was only one hut I think to begin with and I think the planes probably flew from there because it had pilots. We had pilots on board and they had to .... well only two pilots would have flown down anyway from Deception and the other two had to see that it was alright for landing at this base as well, before it was set up. Those flights were probably made while they were doing the building.

(0:35:46 ) Tolson: This little Base 'T', Adelaide base, became notorious in later years as an awful base for unloading cargoes. What had changed? Why was it so wonderful at the time?

Cole: Well the only place you could get ashore was one thing and for the first three or four years it was fine because there was always pack ice to the west which kept it nice and calm in the area of the base. The only problem as far as we were concerned it was iceberg alley. You used to get bergs drifting one way and then another way, the opposite way, past the ship. You wake up in the night being nudged with a berg which wasn't a lot of fun there. That was the problem there in the earlier years. It was perfect for landing there other than that, but later years with the ice decreasing, it became a bit oceanic and you got awful swells coming in. You stood the risk of the scow washing up on the rocks, bouncing up and down. Fortunately I didn't have so much to do with that part. I was .... yes, I suppose I was probably Master when it was getting to that stage.

(0:37:52 ) Tolson: Who in the days of building huts, wooden huts on beaches or rocky outcrops, who was responsible for actually saying, 'Well, we'll put it there', or 'We'd better put it there' ?

Cole: Well, that Base 'T' it was John Green, he was SECFIDS in Stanley, who decided it was alright there. It was a reasonable decision to make. I mean for the first...it was probably longer than four or five years that it was OK because there were subsequent huts put up, generator shed and certainly there were two other huts, more accommodation because there were flights from there to Fossil Bluff which was all done from Adelaide Island. I'm not sure how they would have managed flights from Rothera until they put the runway there. I think there must have been a flat bit that they could have landed on but not to the extent they use it now.

(0:39:31 ) Tolson: John, your progression from Third Mate to Second Mate on the *Biscoe*, then ultimately across to the *Shackleton*, tell me a little bit about the Second Mate's duties. You were involved in hydrographic work, I presume to some extent.

Cole: Yes, I think it was probably just one year Third Mate and then Second Mate. I don't remember how long I was on the *Biscoe* as Second Mate. It was, again, the early years of Adelaide Island and we spent a whole summer down there surveying it with a Royal Navy team on board. That was quite an exciting time. It was sort of hurtling up and down lines all the way along the south coast of Adelaide Island and if the bottom starts coming up you got from full ahead to full astern. It was certainly interesting. These hydrographers, Barry Dickson doing the survey, they really put the hours in because he's surveying all day then go through the plotting and everything at night. I don't know when he got his sleep but he certainly did a few late nights plotting everything that we'd done. That was the whole of one season virtually that we spent doing that.

(0:41:32 ) Tolson: Do you recall how this work was done? You had fairly rudimentary equipment in those days, echo sounders and radars, nothing to what they are today. A lot of small boat work, was that used to ...?

Cole: Yeah, we had a naval hydrographic launch on board that would do the inshore work. So we would put that over in the morning, then steam out, do our lines up and down. It was all done.... before it all started they had to set up points. You put up beacons on as many places as you could and, when we were out there we'd all be on the bridge with sextants taking different angles and people there to record it and just have as many angles and that as you could to be plotted later. It was all go, all day. We'd had enough but the hydrographer, you couldn't stop him, he had the bit between his teeth. It was all quite good fun and the results were pretty good, I think, because I had great faith in the work at the end of it. We could get in and out of Adelaide Island without just creeping in. You could steam in there and know where you were going. Prior to that you just had to get the base on a particular heading and still you weren't sure if you drifted either side whether the bottom was going to come up or not. It was all very... there was absolutely nothing charted when we first went in there. Our first trip into Adelaide Island was very, very slow because the bottom all round there is horrendous. I mean that was probably my first trip to see how that worked. You just couldn't imagine, you average seafarer couldn't imagine how you steam around these days with no chart or anything to go by.

(0:44:35 ) Tolson: I think Captain Bill Johnson was a name that many of you remember well and have worked with. Can you describe him a little bit, the character and how he operated?

Cole: He was an easy-going Irishman, he had a good sense of humour. He was very calm, I never did see him panic. While he was good to be with, he was known as "Kelly", not to his face but I assume he knew he was called "Kelly". I don't know where it came from at all, but I've certainly never been with anybody like him up until then. He knew what he was up to all the time. He was good to be with.

(0:45:55 ) Tolson: Transferring to the *Shackleton*, you were Second Mate on her.

Cole: I was in the .... Jim Martin was Mate on the *Shackleton* and I happened to be doing a bit of a refit of the *Biscoe* in Northam Vospers, or Thorneycroft's as it was then, and 'Frosty' Turnbull saw me and called me over and said: 'Do you know Jim Martin's left?'. I said: 'No I didn't'. He'd just disappeared off the scene and he said : 'Would you like the job?'. 'Yes'. Which possibly surprised some people because there was a bit of rivalry between the *Biscoe* and the *Shackleton* really. I would say that some people thought the *Shackleton* was a bit mad, but I was happy enough to go there anyway. It was promotion, so one doesn't turn down promotion very often. I joined and managed that.

(0:47:38 ) Tolson: Sailing with 'Frosty'.

Cole: Yes.

(0:47:40 ) Tolson: Tell me a bit about Captain Turnbull, 'Frosty'.

Cole: Well he was a little unpredictable but I think everybody on board when he was there quite enjoyed being there. It was a happy ship, no way was it unhappy. I suppose part of the reason it was happy, it was a very easy ship to run. It was very convenient as opposed to the *Biscoe* with derricks and a crane and a hatch that just slid open. You'd arrive at a place and it was all easy to work and you could move cargo fairly rapidly using two boats. We didn't have scows on the *Shackleton*, it was all in boats but everything went very smoothly and quickly. It was a delight to work really. Loading up a scow with the *Biscoe* alongside and filling it up and then sending it away, there was a lot of wasted time alongside and then alongside the other end. with the *Shackleton* with two boats, you had far less ... people were working more or less continuously. People didn't drift off, there was always something to be doing. Well I thoroughly enjoyed my time on there and most of the people are still around and I think they've still got happy memories of it.

(0:49:57 ) Tolson: Did you work with the *Protector* on some seismic works as well didn't you? That was another of the tasks.

Cole: Yes. Well the seismic work, the first time it was going to start about five in the morning and I was on watch. Two-ship seismic which meant the *Protector* set off some charges, we had listening devices out. We were the listening ship, they were supposed to come past close-ish with small charges and steam away from us and this was the first time I'd seen any of this two-ship seismic and they came along for the first run and there was a bang and there was a sort of bit of smoke coming off the rear end of the *Protector*. I wasn't aware that that wasn't normal but after a little while they steamed away and there wasn't any communication for a bit and they said : 'We're headed back to Stanley, we've had an accident on board'. It could only have happened on the first run because they made up two charges, one on deck and one that they threw over and unfortunately both went off at the same time and I think one person was killed and others injured, I think. So that was the end of the two-ship geophysics for quite a while. You could do it again later in the season, probably, I'm not sure. We probably went back to towing the magnetometer around which wasn't one of the delights of *Shackleton* existence. You'd do it for ... well, it seemed like months on end but it was probably just weeks. 'Frosty' used to look for any excuse to pop in to somewhere to have a break from it, much to the annoyance of Peter Parker, I suppose. He was the Chief Scientist at the time. We used to have to try and be the peacemaker between the two.

(0:52:57 ) Tolson: At what stage, what year do you remember becoming in command ? Fairly shortly after?

Cole: Well it was the year before the *Shackleton* packed up, I think. I can't remember what year that was and Tom Woodfield was going for an interview for the ????? [inaudible] half-way through the season. The two ships met somewhere around the South Shetlands and I transferred across, went with Tom from there to Punta Arenas where he got off, flew home and I took over. As it happened the same Jim Martin was Second Mate on that voyage. He just did the one, realised he shouldn't have come back, but I think he enjoyed his trip but realised he'd made a mistake and nobody, as far as I know, knows where he went to after that. I haven't come across anybody that knows where he is.

(0:54:46 ) Tolson: Going from any rank up is always a step. Going from Chief Officer to Captain is a very, very big step. I suppose in Antarctica especially anywhere is dangerous and unpredictable. How if at all had you prepared yourself for this jump, this promotion ?

Cole: You could say that the answer to that is that I hadn't, I suppose, like I hadn't been prepared for going from Second Mate to Mate, but you just do what ... I mean you've observed all of your time at sea and you just take over and do what comes. Ship handling, yes you get more with BAS ships than you do with your average because you are left to manoeuvre in ice and in your average merchant ship you don't vary the engines at all but you are encouraged to handle the ship

a bit with BAS, so you do have a vague idea But I'm sure the first time alongside in Stanley was a nightmare as far as I was concerned. I was quite relieved when it happened OK, but you learn on the job as you're going along.

(0:56:35 ) Tolson: What about dealing with people because you're dealing with a multitude of Fids, scientists and crew and Governors in the Falkland Islands? Was that something that came naturally to you?

Cole: Yes I think so because as Mate you're dealing with most of those things. As Mate you had vague dealings with the Governor but that wasn't a great problem. I wouldn't say it was necessarily me but I got by. I'm talking about the Governors' part, I suppose . Again, you learn as you go on. The association between the Governor and the ships was decreasing at that time. We had less and less to do with..., or the Governor had less and less to do with the ships. I would say nowadays has virtually nothing.

(0:57:50 ) Tolson: Would you pick out any particular voyage as Master as being .... was the first trip in a sense a special trip because it was the first trip as Master?

Cole: Yes, partly. It was partly that and the crowd we had on the ship were very good and it was that time we went furthest, we went down to the Puffball Islands. I can't remember what the idea of going.... oh, it was just a sounding run. Nobody had been, the ship hadn't been down there before as far as I know. I can't say there were any other memorable things about that trip but everything went very well and I was quite happy and certainly quite happy that.... I was only temporary there, I didn't know what was going to happen at the end of the trip. I was quite happy to carry on afterwards as it turned out. In fact, delighted.

(0:59:12 ) Tolson: What did happen at the end of the trip?

Cole: I can't remember when I was told that I would be there the following trip, whether it was before we got home or after, I don't know. I wouldn't have thought it was because that was the time when the building of the *Bransfield* . No, that would have been later. But the *Bransfield* must have been building around that time.

(0:59:56 ) Tolson: At the end of 1969 season was when you decided to leave BAS. You were married in 1966 to Pauline and then you left to go with the Scottish....

Cole: ...Marine Biological Association. It was supposedly a job looking after their boats in Oban but it wasn't really a substantial job. After about , well I'm not sure how many years I did it, I got a phone call to say would I go back, from BAS, would I go back with them on the *Bransfield* and

I wasn't enthusiastic because it was still full trips, which was what encouraged me to go to the Scottish Marine Biological Association because with young children you want a bit of home life. The following year I think it was, or maybe later that year: 'Would I go back half-trips?'. That was a little more appealing so I agreed. I wouldn't say I enjoyed half-trips as much as being there for the whole season because you feel a bit of a traitor, sort of leaving the ship half-way through the season, or joining half-way through as a breath of fresh air when people are getting a bit weary. There isn't the same sort of camaraderie as everybody doing the same thing together but it kept me there and, again, quite enjoyable.

(1:02:25 ) Tolson: You returned in 1974, I think, to BAS.

Cole: I'll take your word for that.

(1:02:35 ) Tolson: And very shortly after that, would it have been your first trip down to Halley?

Cole: Yes, that was, well again, a different experience. I'd never been anywhere near there so you learn as you go along. There's a place to go to and you just go. Fortunately it worked out OK.

(1:03:08 ) Tolson: Is working your way through ice just a case of bashing it or is there a little bit more.

Cole: Well there's a little bit more than that. You have to look a bit ahead and see which looks the easiest route whether you get it right every time, you don't know. You're never going to find out anyway.

(1:03:36) Tolson: Back in the '70's was there actually much information that you could get from radios and weather maps, ice maps that would really help you?

Cole: Not a lot. I think it was probably the beginning of ... Cambridge used to get satellite photos that could tell you a little bit but it wasn't really all that useful in those days. I think the pictures were on the small side and what appeared to be water wasn't. It might be a weaker route and it might not. I'm not sure when those pictures started coming in and again the information was out of date by the time we got it. It was of doubtful help really.

(1:04:42 ) Tolson: Getting down to Halley, there were a variety of ways you could secure the ship. If you were lucky you could get into a nice little creek. That was the ideal wasn't it, as opposed to on the ice cliffs?

Cole: Oh yes. I didn't ever... well, it didn't always get into the creek, Mobster Creek. One time I think we had to along to N9 I think it was called, which is a long way from the base, but most times got into ... well, generally it started off with fast ice off Mobster Creek. You'd hack away as much as you could and get yourself a firm edge to moor alongside and then they'd sort out a route from Mobster Creek to the ship and start unloading then. It was generally better from there than when you're actually in the Creek because it's fine when there's a bit of fast ice in the Creek but it tends to work its way back to where it goes up. If you get in that far, it's fairly tight. you've got your bow on the side of the ice cliff and stern the other side pretty close to the ice cliff.

(1:06:19) Tolson: One of your visits down there would be when you double berthed with the German research ship *Polarstern*. That looked particularly tight in that photograph and you got some nice helicopter flights up there as well.

Cole: Yes, when they came alongside, I think they were probably only alongside for a day? I don't know how I managed it but we had a flight up to the base and over the base in a helicopter and back to the ship. That's definitely the way to get to Halley. Better than going on one of these, what do you call them?

(1:07:15) Tolson: Twin Otters?

Cole: No. We did manage that one, we did join the ship sometimes via a Twin Otter. I didn't manage one of those trips. I don't know how, I couldn't have done the .... not the muskegs, the bigger ones.

(1:07:36) Tolson: Sno-Cats.

Cole: Sno-Cats, yes. A trip to Halley in one of those isn't a lot of fun as far as I'm concerned. It's a long time you seem to be getting there, bouncing up and down.

(1:07:58) Tolson: You must have noticed when you came back to BAS in the '70's a fairly significant change in the type of scientific work being done both on the ships and of course on the bases. In that five-year absence would you say a lot had changed?

Cole: Not an awful lot. I mean it was changing before but with the *Bransfield* coming in it allowed a different mode of operation and you could get more stuff down there and the *Biscoe* and the *Shackleton* were able to take... I would say at Halley, they were always doing ... well, it was just a steady improvement all the way through. Equipment was improving all the time in the early days on the *Shackleton* with the geophysics. They were home-made buoys that they used to put over the side and we used to drop explosives and steam away from them, just to do similar to

the two-ship seismic, and then you'd have to go back and try and find these buoys bobbing around in the ocean. You could do it by setting off an explosive if you didn't quite get back to the same position. In the latter days of that we had a satnav on the *Shackleton* which was a fairly primitive satnav.

(1:09:59) It would work for a while and then you'd get something that would put you in Siberia or something like that. You had to be very careful which positions you took from it. But things like that all helped to improve the science that was going on. These early buoys they were fairly hit and miss as to whether they were working or not. You'd put one over and then steam away and then you'd have to go back and pick it up and do adjustments. Nothing was particularly sophisticated because it was the early days of .... you know, it was designed in-house and not to the best of their ability, but they were on a learning curve. Obviously five years later with these sort of learning curves they'd improved a lot. In the early days on the *Biscoe* we did these South Orkneys benthic surveys which were the very early primitive... you know, just putting a line over the side and towing a little trawl net or they had these traps that you could put down to get up mud. All of these things were developed in these early years and the results, compared to what you could get now, obviously were inferior. Well, probably useless now but that is how life goes with science. What people know about the stars and galaxies and that now have changed in the past 30 or 40 years. Different technology.

(1:12:22 ) Tolson: You must have seen over the years in the '70's and of course in the '80's an enormous change on board ship with the equipment making your world that much smaller. Satellite phones, more sophisticated radars and echosounders. How did that affect you as Master? Was it all good?

Cole: I wouldn't say it was all good because satellite communications meant that you were rung from Cambridge, I suppose. Whereas before it was just telegrams and what you did one day was history the next. Nobody knew where you were... well, yes they did know what you were doing because you sent daily messages but they were fairly brief and more what you'd done and where you'd be the next day, I suppose. But when you can pick up a phone, before you do anything you have to think about letting somebody know you're going to do it, whereas you just did it in the days before. But echosounders being so much better, I mean nowadays they've got these forward scanning sounders which would make a huge difference and radars, the sort of things you can pick up now, vastly superior to what we could pick up. If you saw an iceberg you'd probably know that there were growlers around but you wouldn't necessarily pick up the ones that could do you a bit of harm. They'd just look like a bit of white or yellow on the screen. Shorelines, I mean the comparisons are .... you wonder how you managed with them before. Same as people managed with sails come to that. I don't know how they used to manage in days gone by at all.

(1:15:02 ) Tolson: With the advancing technology within BAS, have you found that the friendliness and the cooperation on board ship and on bases stayed much the same or did that change too inevitably?

Cole: I would say it stayed fairly much the same but you didn't see as much of people because ... I mean you didn't have many people on board from Southampton or Grimsby latterly, where we sailed from. People would join in Montevideo or Stanley. You'd have them on four days down to a base and they were off and you just didn't really get to know people the same way. It was still a friendly organisation , it stayed that way but you just didn't know people the same way as before. You tended to know everybody that was down there, more or less, except people that had gone down on the *Kista Dan* or *Perla Dan* in the early days because in the early days neither ship went down to Halley. Halley was a little bit apart. The "true" Antarctic. [Laughs].

(1:16:47 ) Tolson: The enlarged bases that you were seeing, the Rothera base and of course the new Halley base, the overground Halley base, this was putting an enormous change on the complexity of base life and, hence, the marine life, the urgency and complexity of getting stuff down there.

Cole: Yes, everything got bigger and bigger. It didn't affect us particularly, it was just different ways of thinking. We had bigger vehicles to take down, which created their own problems of getting them off I suppose but generally you could get them on and off alright. I mean we had problems but you just took more stuff down every year. It was reaching that sort of stage. Most things having been built now, I don't know how they managed. Rothera was mainly put up by chartering a ship to take the stuff down. It just got too much for *Bransfield* and the *James Clark Ross* to get everything down. It's just a whole different scale of working and there was a lot more money spent. The science is certainly now ... it's more science than there ever was, I would say, because people just go in, you get experts fly in for a week maybe, do whatever's necessary and out again. Whereas the early days you wouldn't get too many top grade scientists willing to spend the time necessary to get down there and back. Equipment is so much better on the bases than it used to be as well. I mean the results must be so much better than in the early days because, well, progress if you like.

(1:19:53 ) Tolson: Can we go back quite a few years , in fact to the days when the whaling station at Grytviken was still operational and you have early memories of visits there and encounters with some of the whaling people? But give me a little bit of a visual image of what Grytviken was like when it was a whaling station. It had a community about it, a cinema, graveyard...

Cole: ... church. Yes, well it was all self contained. It Was all ... it was a whole town, if you like. They certainly had to look after themselves the whole time, a bit like a base hut but on a far larger scale. They were capable of repairing ships to a lesser degree. They did have a dry dock down there. when you first steam in there you look over and there's steam coming out of everywhere or just about. When you walk round there you have to watch where you're going because it's all hustle and bustle, if they've got a whale on the plan, that is. And certainly they had whales on the plan when I was round there once, well more than once probably. It's fascinating watching them work a whale coming up. Pull it up and there's people just effortlessly, apparently, digging into them and taking off the blubber and that's all taken and disappears one way and other bits are cut off and disappear another way and stuck into these vats and the smell is delightful. I don't know why they even....I mean nowadays you wouldn't be allowed anywhere near something like that going on because the health and safety people would not allow it. You could easily, if you're not careful, walk in the wrong place but we were allowed to just wander around and somebody would tell you. 'Watch it going there'. But you could see what was going on anywhere you wanted.

(1:22:50 ) Tolson: Did you ever pop into the church, the cinema or the graveyard?

Cole: Yes, well anybody nowadays still goes to the graveyard but I mean that's far separated from the church. But the church, yes went in there and went in the cinema. Probably watched a film there once but it's a bit on the primitive side. I mean the church isn't, it was like a normal church anywhere really. I did go in there one time for a Christmas service I think it was , in the days when the whalers weren't there. But everything there now, or when I left, was getting fairly derelict and it wasn't just the Norwegians. The Norwegians that were there when I first went down, then they closed up for a bit and then the Japanese came in for a year or two but it was all at a dying stage then. It was just as interesting watching them carve up the whales.

(1:24:23) We used to go round to Stromness and Leith. I'm not sure what we actually went for. Probably to take a whaling inspector from King Edward Point round because there was a ... can't remember his name, the High Commissioner or ... can't remember what he was called. One under the Governor anyway, an individual in King Edward Point with his wife and he probably commandeered the ship to go round and see his empire there. I remember going round, walking round to Stromness once and coming back on one of the small workboats. They had these Bolinger engines and the way they came alongside is they just hurtle straight towards the jetty and these Bolingers they just make a single stroke "bonk, bonk, bonk" , a fascinating noise especially when it's echoing round the fiords there. They come hurtling towards the jetty there and just get pretty close and then go astern. You wouldn't think they'd have enough power to stop but they seemed to. They knew what they were up to and that was good .

(1:26:12 ) Tolson: Hard bunch, were they, the whalers? Drinkers, hard workers?

Cole: Well they didn't have much in the way of drink but they did manage alcohol from either potatoes or boot polish or anything they could make alcohol out of. There was a time we were leaving somewhere and I had to kick some whalers off out of one of the cabins because I think we were taking somebody back to Stanley and we were sailing shortly and, well, I had to make sure they actually left so I had to wait until they'd finished their drink and unfortunately they had a spare glass. So I had some of this alcohol, whatever it was. It was definitely alcohol but I wouldn't want it as a regular drink I don't think. I wouldn't say they were a hard bunch.

(1:27:40 ) Tolson: The Norwegian whalers eventually left and the Japanese then came in for a few years a couple of years later. Any memories of the Japanese as whalers?

Cole: Yes, they were quite hospitable. One time they invited us to a party and we went round I think. I don't remember whether they showed a film or something but the main thing was drinking. Drinking with these Japanese, they were knocking it back, so we were knocking it back. It wasn't until the next day that we realised that the ones we started drinking with weren't the ones we finished up drinking with. We suffered from sore heads, they probably just had one drink each, a rotating group entertaining us. There was another time at Leith, I think it was, we went alongside a transport there and as we left they .... over the loudspeaker system old lang syne in sort of Japanese style music was being played as we sailed which was all quite jolly. What amazed me was how they managed to get it working again after it had been abandoned, the whaling station, for two or three years. I don't know how long it was. I think it was 1960 .... no, I don't know. I'd say it was 1965 when the Japanese were there. I suppose it could have been ....

1:29:59 Going back to the Norwegians, one time up at the hydroelectric lake when the hydroelectric plant was still working. I mean it was still working when the Japanese were there because there was a Norwegian caretaker left at Grytviken for quite a while. He was up there and asked us if we wanted to look at the hydroelectric plant and we went in and it was all spotless and neat. He said : 'It doesn't take much to move these wheels', the flywheel that they had. He just got one hand on it and started moving it quite successfully. [He said] 'Have a go'. I don't know what knack he had but we couldn't move it at all. We realised we'd been had. It was certainly an impressive way. He had lights and everything all for nothing and for a few years the whaling station was kept in good condition. Once he left and once Ricky Chinn , Base Leader, left, it started getting Polish trawlers coming in for water and they just went round and broke into places and after that nobody bothered going round doing the buildings up and that was the beginning of the end of the place as a working place at all because the wind would get in, take the roofs off and it didn't take long for it to all look fairly derelict. But it's certainly still a

fascinating place to walk around. Same as Deception probably is, but now there are these ideas that we should clear everywhere up but I'm not quite so sure about that one.

(1:32:29 ) Tolson: Going back to Deception, in one of your very early trips you had the misfortune perhaps or pleasure of going in there just after one of the eruptions. Tell us about that business.

Cole: Yes, it was the first eruption. We didn't hear about it early enough to get to Deception to get our people out but the Chileans .... well, the eruption was behind the Chilean base and they moved out. I think they were walking along with tin on their heads to protect them and walked along to the British base. The *Piloto Pardo* was the ship that got there and they took everybody out by helicopter, our people included. I think they were very fortunate because I think the helicopter was being covered by ash as it was flying in and out. Anyway, they got them all out and we met up with the *Piloto Pardo*. I can't remember where exactly, probably what is now Presidente Frei, I'm not sure. We took our people from them and sent the appropriate bottles of whisky across. we then went back to Deception and steamed in and went quite a way up the harbour, observing it as it was erupting still. Eventually one went a little bit higher. I think Frosty decided that was close enough. It was certainly close enough as far as I was concerned. He's a little bit more used to volcanoes, having come from New Zealand but it was my first experience of a volcano. I was most impressed by it.

(1:34:57) Then we went to our base and went in with the boat with our people so that they could go in and pick up their things they'd left behind and back to the ship, another look at the volcano and sailed away. That was that for that period of time. I'm not sure whether it was later that year or the following year, we had some volcanologists on board. They came to look at what had happened and study it. It was quite interested going ashore with them now and again and walking nearer bits that I certainly would never walk near. In places under your feet you could look down and it was red hot. You certainly wouldn't have boiled anything on it, it would have just disintegrated. But on the actual top you were alright with your rubber boots even. It was only inches down that it was red hot. I mean how they know what they can do. Experience, I guess. I certainly would never have walked anywhere round there without their knowledge. That was the first of the eruptions. Of course we put people back in after that because it wasn't going to go up again, but it did. But I didn't see much of the ... I wasn't around until after it had happened and saw the aftermath of what happened to the base. Well we didn't go back again. They'd taken away the wooden hut and the new plastic one that was gone halfway through the middle of it. I think they were lucky to get off that time. I don't remember how they did or the workings of that one.

(1:37:43 ) Tolson: Coming more to the end of your time with BAS, and obviously the progress and ever-changing face of things, did you remain happy there until the end or was it becoming a bit jaded?

Cole: Remained happy to the end but I wasn't sorry to ... I was quite happy to leave at that time, I think. I was getting long in the tooth as well I suppose. I'd had enough and the system, well technology was probably getting a bit beyond me to a certain extent. I mean I'm only just getting used to computers [laughs]. They were coming in with a vengeance and as far as I was concerned I got out at the right time, I think.

(1:38:56 ) Tolson: In a career that spanned many years you met many, many great characters both scientists, Fids, crew and officers. When would you say, perhaps from the friendliness, cosiness point of view, was the great highlight period?

Cole: Oh, definitely the earlier years because you were there with people for a longer time so you got know people. In the latter years you didn't. Well there were bigger numbers on the *Bransfield* but you didn't have them on board for very long so you didn't really get to know people and that took a bit off the edge of things. We were getting better at getting into a place, out of a place and it was all speeded up. In the early days you couldn't steam around at night really because the charts weren't up to it and apart from that you were generally all working in the day and you would anchor and you'd have to get your rest at night, which didn't warrant steaming around.

(1:40:32 ) Tolson: Best voyage?

Cole: I don't know. Could have been the first one as Master, I don't know. There were a lot of enjoyable ones, I wouldn't pick one out really because it was a new challenge probably, the first as Master. But I wouldn't pick one out really.

(1:41:07 ) Tolson: And then the great moment when you got your Polar Medal.

Cole: Yes, mmm. Well that was ... met the Queen. There was a whole crowd of us up there and we went out afterwards and had a little celebration. Enough of that one [laughs].

(1:41:49 ) Tolson: There's more to it ?

Cole: No, I don't think so. A proud moment but good for the wife and children. I would say that was, as far as I was concerned, it was as nerve-wracking as the first time into Stanley on the *Biscoe* as Master. Well, going alongside and meeting Governors and the like.

(1:42:28 ) Tolson: Any special, talking of gardeners, any enjoyable visits up to Government House? Do you have any recollections there?

Cole: Mmm, yes, I do have one. I went up there, I had stayed there the night and Robin Pitaluga was there as well and it was coming up to dinner time and there was a knock at the door and it was Robin: 'Have you got a spare pair of black socks?'  
I said: 'No, I haven't and what's more I haven't got a pair for myself either. I've got them on board'. So we both had to shoot off down to the ship - I didn't have transport - we both shot off down to the ship and back as quick as we could because we had to get ready for the evening. That was our little jaunt. We did tell... it was Arrowsmith at that time... told him the problem we'd had which was all quite amusing really. That's about the only one that sticks out in my memory.

(1:44:01 ) Tolson: You never had the pleasure of taking a Governess out?

Cole: Yes, I think we must have. I think I must have been on board when Arrowsmith was on board one time but he was a bit more aloof than others and he tended to keep with Bill Johnson. Bill Johnson used to stay in his cabin most of the time and they probably kept out of the way there. Didn't really see an awful lot of him. I think I missed quite a few of these Governor trips. I don't remember. I would have thought Arrowsmith ???? [incomprehensible] must have been on board once on a trip I did but I can't really remember. He was a lot more easy-going than I ever thought Arrowsmith was but then I was a bit higher up so I wasn't affected in quite the same way.

(1:45:27 ) Tolson: Well John, thank you very much indeed.

Cole: Right.

ENDS.

**Interesting Items:**

**[0:18:30] Clothing provision at Stanley before going south. Complain about jeans being too long and they just cut them a bit shorter.**

**[0:21:00] First trip into ice fields, not knowing which type of ice to avoid and which to not bother about.**

**[0:26:00] Dogs being transported on board not good - too much howling and rattling of chains outside your cabin.**

**[0:32:00] Watching films, playing bridge and 'clagg' while ship is stuck fast in ice.**

**[0:41:00] Surveying uncharted waters often involved rapid change from full ahead to full astern as the seabed came up to meet you.**

**[0:51:00] Fatality on board *HMS Protector* during seismic operations.**

**[1:04:00] Early satellite photos from Cambridge of limited value for navigating in ice and early satnav systems capable of mis-locating the ship to Siberia rather than the Weddell Sea.**

**[1:10:00] Massive improvements in safety at sea with modern forward looking echosounders and more sensitive radars.**

**[1:20:00] Visiting active Norwegian and Japanese whaling operations at Grytviken, South Georgia.**

**[1:26:00] Tasting whalers' alcohol made from potato or boot polish.**

**[1:33:00] Visiting Deception Island during eruption. Chileans evacuated UK and own personnel by helicopter to their ship, *Piloto Pardo*.**

