

TONY BAKER

Edited transcript of a recording of Tony Baker interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at the Royal Hotel Cardiff on 11th June 2010. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 30th January 2011.

Track 1 [0:00:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is Tony Baker, recorded by Chris Eldon Lee at the BAS Club Reunion, Cardiff, on the 11th of June 2010. Tony Baker.*

Track 1 [0:00:11] Tony Baker: Well I am Tony Baker and I live in Warrington, Lancashire – Cheshire as it is now. They moved it in 1974.

Track 1 [0:00:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *Where were you born?*

Track 1 [0:00:22] Tony Baker: I was born in Warrington.

Track 1 [0:00:23] Chris Eldon Lee: *When?*

Track 1 [0:00:23] Tony Baker: 1940.

Track 1 [0:00:25] Chris Eldon Lee: *And the date?*

Track 1 [0:00:26] Tony Baker: The 19th of October. A Saturday night during an air raid, so my mother told me. Anyway that is that part of it.

Track 1 [0:00:37] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you are going to be 70 this year?*

Track 1 [0:00:38] Tony Baker: I am 70 in October, yes. I feel like it, to be honest, now. Just after this trauma that I have had, trying to find the hotel and a parking place.

Track 1 [0:00:51] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well the good news is that you have not got to go anywhere for three days now.*

Track 1 [0:00:54] Tony Baker: No, we are here for good, as it were.

Track 1 [0:00:55] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was your first brush with the Antarctic. What was your first contact with it, as a child or whatever?*

Track 1 [0:01:01] Tony Baker: Well I used to read a lot. I was an avid reader as a child, but I did not read a lot of fiction. I used to read adventure stories I suppose you would call them, and exploration and history, and that sort of thing. And I began to read lots of books about the Antarctic: Scott, and one in particular which influenced me was Kevin Walton's *Two Years in the Antarctic* and soon after that I read Sir Vivian Fuchs' *Crossing of Antarctica*. Both of these books inspired me to go and see this place for myself. Of course I did not have any idea of how to go about this.

Track 1 [0:02:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *You were still a child, were you?*

Track 1 [0:02:04] Tony Baker: No, no. By this time I was 22 or thereabouts.

Track 1 [0:02:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was it about Kevin Walton's book that stuck with you all those years?*

Track 1 [0:02:16] Tony Baker: I think it was the stories of the dog sledging, basically. It just seemed so tremendously exciting, to drive a dog sledge in the mountains. He wrote vividly, I thought, about these things and well that is all I can say really. I found it inspiring.

Track 1 [0:02:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *So did you set out to follow in his footsteps?*

Track 1 [0:02:46] Tony Baker: Up to a point, I think, I must have done. As I say, I read *The Crossing* as well, from Sir Vivian Fuchs, and many others: *South* and Mawson's books and so on, but at this time I did not have any idea of me being able to do anything like this, because although I had read the books, I really had no conception of FIDS as it then was (Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey). But I had a feeling that somewhere or other I had seen mention of this being an ongoing thing, the FIDS, and that it was probably still happening now. If so, then to me it stood to reason that they must from time to time require joiners, carpenters or whatever, builders of sorts. So I went to the reference library in Warrington and I just sat down with the librarian and explained what I was looking for. I said 'I think, and I don't really know, actually I can't tell you where this thought came from, but I had a feeling that I had seen an advert for a radio operator for the Falkland Islands Dependencies.' So he got a load of magazines out. I now know that they were *New Scientist* magazines; at that time I did not. We spent some time, the pair of us, looking through these magazines, and we found an advertisement for, I think it was an electrician. So I just took the details down and I wrote off to FIDS offering my services.

Track 1 [0:04:47] Chris Eldon Lee: *The year was?*

Track 1 [0:04:48] Tony Baker: That was in 1962, and it really shows you my naïveté because at that time it was towards the back end of the year when I wrote about this. I got a reply back quite soon, saying that they did have positions but not at that time because the new Fids were actually on their way South. Everything had been done earlier on in the year, you see, which had passed over me; I had not realised that. So they said 'If you are still interested next year, write again next summer, the summer of '63.' So this was exciting to me and I couldn't wait for the following year. I think I wrote in the early spring to offer my services once more. On that occasion I was rewarded with an interview. 'Go down to Gillingham Street', I think, in those days, and I was interviewed by Bill Sloman, Johnny Green and there was one other whose name escapes me now. But the three anyway and they of course interviewed me at length and eventually offered me a job there and then. They sent me off to, was it Stagg Place, for a medical.

Track 2 [0:06:33] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was it a difficult interview, or was it a piece of cake?*

Track 2 [0:06:40] Tony Baker: I don't think it was, actually, no. It was just like a chat. I think it was something like this. They would ask me a question and let me go on at length. They asked me what had interested me in this in the first place and I told them the same things that I have told you. I do not think it was any deeper than that, really.

They asked questions about my trade qualifications and I had my paper qualifications with me, so they were able to see them at the time.

Track 2 [0:07:17] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you think they were sussing you out psychologically?*

Track 2 [0:07:22] Tony Baker: Well at the time I did not think anything of it really, but I suppose they must have been, up to a point. I do not see how else they could have chosen someone for such a posting. So I suppose they were doing.

Track 2 [0:07:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *Who did you have to tell that you were going to go to the Antarctic?*

Track 2 [0:07:41] Tony Baker: Who did I have to tell? Well my mother and father, of course. I still lived at home at that time, and Mother was extremely upset. One is dead now but I had at that time three brothers and the two elder ones were both tradesmen – an electrician and a sheet metal worker – and when they reached the age of 21, they were immediately drafted into National Service and away for two years, one in East Africa and the other one was at Suez, in the Suez Crisis. Then in 1960 the Conservative Government stopped National Service and my mother was overjoyed because I would not have to go. I missed it by 12 months. So that was marvellous, and then I turned up on the door and said ‘I am going to the Antarctic for two years.’ She could not cope with that really. She was very upset over it. I suppose she got used to it as time went by, you know. Eventually they drove me down to Southampton to get the ship, but it was a bad time for her, to lose me, because she had built up her hopes that I was not going to go into National Service, and all of a sudden I told her something even worse.

Track 2 [0:09:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *How well prepared do you think you were when you got on board that ship?*

Track 2 [0:09:22] Tony Baker: Well obviously I was a little apprehensive. Who would not be, because you were leaving home and your friends and so on, for the unknown, but I do not think I was daunted by it. I think I was looking forward to it. I actually fancied myself as a bit of a sailor, so I was looking forward to the sea voyage, because my dad used to take us on to the Isle of Man ferry. Or, in those days they used to have a sailing from Liverpool to Llandudno, so we often used to go on that. It was wonderful; I used to enjoy that. So I thought ‘I am a good sailor. I won’t be seasick or anything like that.’ But I found things slightly differently, although I was only sick once and that was because somebody else was sick and they were sitting close to me and the smell of it all and so on, that affected me somewhat, and so I felt sick. But I actually say I never really felt at ease on the boats going South. I always felt a little bit queasy. I did not drink much on board because of the way I felt, and I spent quite a lot of time in bed. Having thought I would be a good sailor, it turned out that I was not the best sailor.

Track 3 [0:11:09] Chris Eldon Lee: *How about being trained for Antarctic conditions? Had you had lots of training? Crevasse rescue?*

Track 3 [0:11:14] Tony Baker: None whatsoever.

Track 3 [0:11:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *Nothing at all?*

Track 3 [0:11:16] Tony Baker: No, none whatsoever. Prior to sailing, the only thing that I had done was to attend the Cambridge Conference and meet the other Fids that were going down, and all the older people of course, everybody that was there, and I found that extremely interesting to hear the talks that were given about what we were going to be doing down there.

Track 3 [0:11:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were they all like you? Young lads?*

Track 3 [0:11:50] Tony Baker: Oh they were all young lads, yes. Most of them, well 50/50 I would say, were university graduates or undergraduates, and the rest of them were engineers or people like myself, or doggymen and climbers and that sort of thing.

Track 3 [0:12:13] Chris Eldon Lee: *So did you have any idea where you were being sent?*

Track 3 [0:12:16] Tony Baker: Yes. I think I was told. I am almost certain that I was told at the Cambridge Conference that I would be going to Halley Bay, and that interested me.

Track 3 [0:12:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did it mean anything to you?*

Track 3 [0:12:31] Tony Baker: Yes, it did, because I had seen the photographs of Halley Bay, of the cliffs at Halley Bay and of the base, the old base, which IGY had erected. These were in Vivian Fuchs' book. So yes, I felt that I was going to somewhere that I almost knew, and I was certainly looking forward to going there and arriving there. I did not really know though, quite what I was letting myself in for, because it was only when things started to come along... I was employed as a builder, and it suddenly dawned on me, I suppose, that I was going down there to build, and I was not going down there to drive a dog team, or to climb mountains and suchlike. So I suppose that was a little bit of a dampener on my spirits somewhat, to think that. However as it transpired, things totally turned round.

Track 3 [0:13:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *How do you mean?*

Track 3 [0:13:41] Tony Baker: Well, I went down initially as the sole "builder" (in inverted commas); I went down as the sole builder to erect a new office block, which was quite a large building. It was to house a radio office, a meteorological office, a surveying office, doctor's surgery, and a glaciological office. Initially everybody, all the spare hands when we first arrived there, after the ship had departed, all the spare hands helped me to get the fabrication up, the steelwork and the outer covering of the hut which was all pre-fabricated panels. It was not the old tongue and groove business. So it went up fairly quickly. Once it was weatherproofed, it was then up to me to continue, basically on my own but if I needed a lift, other people would come in and help me and so on. So this went throughout the winter months, me working on this and finishing off the inside of the building.

Track 4 [0:15:04] Tony Baker: I have to say at this point that a lot of the work was done by individuals. They were amateur or DIY enthusiasts, so Gordon Bowra, the doctor, and Dudley Jehan who were good friends, they fitted out the doctor's surgery. They did that. They also put the flooring down in the loft from end to end. That was it, and I tackled all the rest of it, basically: the meteorological office, the survey office, the radio shack. Then at either end, at the met end and at the radio shack end, I had to cut a hole in the wall which gave access to a hatch and a tower which went up to ground level, above ground level eventually. Of course initially it was at roof level. This was for the entry of the aerial feeders and for the met men to go up and observe the... Well actually it was the aurora man who used to go up there and take photographs. He had an all-sky camera up there and he used to go up there and observe the aurora.

Track 4 [0:16:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *So was the whole base underground at that point?*

Track 4 [0:16:35] Tony Baker: Apart from this building which I had just put up. Everything else was underground, yes, and it was not long before this one was being buried also.

Track 4 [0:16:47] Chris Eldon Lee: *So were you taking that into account when you were building it?*

Track 4 [0:16:49] Tony Baker: No, it was built on a floor like this, really, on snow. We started by levelling it first of all, and then we put expanded metal down on it. It started out as perforated metal sheets, and then they had got this big machine which had pulled it from one end to the other, like that, and as it pulled it out, it opened these into diamond shapes, these perforations, you see. That was put down and then... That was over the whole area, and then at the sides, running along underneath where the vertical stanchions of the building came down to the ground, we put corrugated iron sheets to provide extra support so that they did not press down into the snow. It was thought that that would prevent a lot of damage being done, but it really did not. It may have extended the life of the building by a very short time indeed – not long. But anyway this went through to some time in the August of 1964. The building was basically up and running with still work to do but work that could be done by other people.

Track 4 [0:18:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *You were working at ridiculously low temperatures, weren't you?*

Track 4 [0:18:24] Tony Baker: Oh yes. As a matter of fact I made a note about that on one occasion. As a joiner, if you are doing a lot of nailing, small panel pins and that type of thing, which is exactly what I was doing with nailing the ceiling up, you used to take a handful of panel pins and put them in your mouth to hold them, and then you would take them out like that and 'Bang, bang, bang!' and they would be into the ceiling. I did it without thinking and of course they all immediately froze to my tongue, to my lips, and they bled when I pulled them off. Because at times it was about -49 while this was going on. Now that was fine as long as it was... you were indoors. Unheated but it was all right because you were out of the wind. It is the wind that kills; the temperatures you can cope with fairly well.

Track 4 [0:19:33] Chris Eldon Lee: *But does wood perform differently at -49 degrees?*

Track 4 [0:19:37] Tony Baker: I do not think so really to be honest.

Track 4 [0:19:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *It doesn't get harder?*

Track 4 [0:19:43] Tony Baker: No I never really felt that.

Track 4 [0:19:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *OK.*

Track 4 [0:19:47] Tony Baker: But I do remember the nails sticking to my mouth. I only did it the once.

Track 5 [0:19:51] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was there any scope for creativity and artistry, or was it very much just rudimentary carpentry work?*

Track 5 [0:19:58] Tony Baker: No. Well it was basic carpentry work but it was really up to the individual whether they wanted to be more artistic in things that they were doing. But no, not a lot really.

Track 5 [0:20:18] Chris Eldon Lee: *I suppose you couldn't nip out and buy a nice piece of mahogany, could you really?*

Track 5 [0:20:21] Tony Baker: No. At the end of the year, when you made out what they call the indents – this would be requesting supplies for next year – you could request a piece of mahogany if you had reason to do so. Within reason it would be supplied for you to use. In fact, I do not know where we got it from really but I did manage to get a piece of mahogany from somewhere, and I cut two shields out of this mahogany, one for me and one for an artistic chap, Jeremy Wright, and he painted them with the coat of arms of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey. He painted them on and then varnished them; he had one and I have got one. I still have that at home.

Track 5 [0:21:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *When you were doing your work, the client in England would be looking down over your shoulder all the time, making sure you did it to the best of your ability, and produced a nice piece of work for them to live with.*

Track 5 [0:21:33] Tony Baker: Yes.

Track 5 [0:21:34] Chris Eldon Lee: *In the Antarctic I guess there was nobody looking over your shoulder. You were rough and ready chaps. Did you find you were cutting corners and reducing your standards at all?*

Track 5 [0:21:42] Tony Baker: I am not sure. I suppose inevitably you would do because things had to be done fairly quickly.

Track 5 [0:22:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *And you had limited resources.*

Track 5 [0:22:03] Tony Baker: We had limited resources so I suppose they did err a little on the rough and ready side, but I did not really notice it that much to be honest.

Two years later I went down for the rebuilding of Halley Bay (the complete base). That was in 1967. I was one of a number of joiners and builders on that job because it was a very big job: seven complete new huts.

Track 5 [0:22:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was this Grillage Village?*

Track 5 [0:22:44] Tony Baker: Grillage Village, yes. But myself and Dave Hill, another joiner, we were tasked with fitting out the lounge building, so we worked quite precisely to that. We made as posh a job as we could of it. Dave did the bar and I did some special lighting which ran around the join like a cornice. It was fluorescent tubes but they were inside a housing with a plastic cover of some sort like a translucent glazing, that part I did, and I also worked on the bench seating around the walls and we upholstered them in, I cannot remember, it must have been some kind of leatherette I think, at that time. So yes, we worked nicely on that. We made as professional a job as we could on it, but if you were working on the garage door...

Track 5 [0:23:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Which you did?*

Track 5 [0:24:01] Tony Baker: Which I did, yes. It would not be as important.

Track 5 [0:24:03] Chris Eldon Lee: *You had problems with that didn't you?*

Track 5 [0:24:04] Tony Baker: Ah well now, I am not sure which one you mean here.

Track 5 [0:24:10] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well you tell me.*

Track 5 [0:24:11] Tony Baker: Well the original garage and generator shed were built back to back with one another and by the time I had gone down there, they were buried, and the only way into them... There was a roof hatch to go down a ladder but the only way into it for vehicle traffic or for the drums of fuel was down the long slope, and at the top of the slope I made a drawbridge door which lay flat on the surface of the snow and it had canvas around the edges of it that you could stretch out onto the snow surface and cover with rough snow and that made a very good door because the snow normally just blew over the top of it. That was fine. It was a huge door; it was as big as this room is in square area you know, and it had a big tripod thing with a handle, and you turned the handle to lift the door up. It was not hinged, it was just... There was a stake at the back to stop it from sliding back and it just lifted up. You could drive in, you could drive out, and then you would lower it down when you had finished doing what you were doing.

Track 6 [0:25:34] Tony Baker: However I think probably the garage door that you are remembering was on Grillage Village. Before we went South on this occasion, four or five of us builders were taken to Ipswich. Now I am not sure of the name of the company but I think it might have been Boulton & Paul [Transcriber comment: the company is actually in Norwich – Andy Smith] who made these buildings. We went to see them. They were going to erect a part of one to show us how it was done. It so happened that they erected the garage, or one end of the garage, to show us this door that was supplied. It was a roller door. I am not sure whether it was a roller door or whether it folded; I cannot remember. But anyway, a lovely door, but it was not tall enough.

Track 6 [0:26:39] Tony Baker: I said to Derek Gipps, who was the man at the time (I think he was in charge of procurement or something). I said 'The 'kegs won't go in there. They won't fit down through that doorway.' 'Of course they will!' I said 'They won't.' 'Oh, yes they will.' I said 'Well, you mark my words.' And of course they didn't because the original Muskegs that were supplied were like the original VW Beetle car, the little round-topped thing, but the 'kegs that we had at that time at Halley Bay were the same basic machine but that little round-topped cabin had been removed and they had put a big square box on top with bunks in. It stood about four foot taller than the others, and they would not go in, you see. So anyway when it all came to be finished, and it was all up and running in Halley Bay, Derek Gipps came down to have a look at it all and I was really very pleased to say to him 'Come and look at this. I told you it wouldn't bloody fit.' And of course it would not fit. He was a bit embarrassed by it I think. He did not say anything to me. He walked off in a bit of a huff.

Track 6 [0:28:05] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you extend it to make it fit?*

Track 6 [0:28:07] Tony Baker: Well I had to make... We fitted it to the top, as high as it would go, as high as we required it and it came down to about 4 ft above the ground level. So I made a great big panel which you had to lift in and out and fit underneath it, and then lower the door down on top of it. It worked fine actually. It worked OK once it was done, but I was just so annoyed because they would not take my advice. I had been there for two years and I knew exactly what was required, but they do not ask.

Track 6 [0:28:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *Can you think of examples where the skills you acquired whilst you were still here came in really handy in the Antarctic, or were you having to learn new skills because of the conditions you were working in?*

Track 6 [0:28:52] Tony Baker: You mean trade skills?

Track 6 [0:28:55] Chris Eldon Lee: *Yes. Carpentry skills.*

Track 6 [0:28:56] Tony Baker: Carpentry skills, no.

Track 6 [0:28:57] Chris Eldon Lee: *It was transferable?*

Track 6 [0:28:59] Tony Baker: Transferable, yes; pretty much the same. I served my time in a chemical company as a carpenter, as a joiner actually.

Track 6 [0:29:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *Before or after?*

Track 6 [0:29:12] Tony Baker: Before I went. As a 15-year-old I went to work for a Unilever company in Warrington, and I served my six years apprenticeship there. Now that was totally different training to what I would have had if I had gone to work for a building company. A lot of it was posher work, more high class work, because we worked in the offices and things like that. We used mahogany; we used oak, and that sort of thing. I could not have put a roof on a house for the love of Mike. I had

studied these things at school (at day release) but I had never worked on one, and I would have found it very difficult to put my hand to that.

Track 7 [0:30:06] Chris Eldon Lee: *But you had to do it?*

Track 7 [0:30:08] Tony Baker: No I did not have to do it because I never worked in the building trade.

Track 7 [0:30:10] Chris Eldon Lee: *I mean in the Antarctic you had to.*

Track 7 [0:30:12] Tony Baker: No, in the Antarctic I didn't because it was a different kind of building there. They were all steel-framed buildings, covered in panels. You did not have to build a traditional roof with roof spars and rafters and things like that.

Track 7 [0:30:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *So had you put up buildings in the UK that resembled those you had to make in the Antarctic or was that new to you?*

Track 7 [0:30:35] Tony Baker: Well no. Not really, no.

Track 7 [0:30:37] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you were learning a bit?*

Track 7 [0:30:38] Tony Baker: I was learning a little bit on that but it was not a very big learning curve, to do that.

Track 7 [0:30:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *OK.*

Track 7 [0:30:46] Tony Baker: All the steelwork had been sent down. It was cut and drilled and it was just a matter of bolting things together.

Track 7 [0:30:52] Chris Eldon Lee: *Like Meccano, was it?*

Track 7 [0:30:53] Tony Baker: Meccano, yes.

Track 7 [0:30:54] Chris Eldon Lee: *Before we move on to other things, is there anything else about your professional work down there you want to talk about? Any great achievements or embarrassing disasters?*

Track 7 [0:31:03] Tony Baker: I don't really think so, to be honest, no.

Track 7 [0:31:07] Chris Eldon Lee: *OK. When it came to Grillage Village year in '67, you must have got to know 'Big Al' Smith, did you?*

Track 7 [0:31:13] Tony Baker: Oh yes I was with Big Al, Jim Shirtcliffe, Fanny Hill and John Gallsworthy. They were all people that were on my year there.

Track 7 [0:31:34] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was that year like, because that must have been a huge explosion of activity, mustn't it?*

Track 7 [0:31:38] Tony Baker: It was. It was the biggest year. They have had bigger years since, but up to that point it was the biggest year there had ever been.

[Transcriber comment. In fact there were more winterers, 38, in 1967 than any other winter at Halley before or since. Andy Smith] In British Antarctic Survey history. We had two bases: the old one and about a mile and a half away the new one – Grillage Village. Memory fades actually and I am not sure whether we had 50 people at one time at Grillage Village, plus the people that were down at the old base. So it would be something like 70 people altogether, in Halley Bay.

Track 7 [0:32:25] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were you building Grillage Village in the summer or in the winter down there?*

Track 7 [0:32:28] Tony Baker: Well it started in the summer. The ship unloaded. We worked 12-hour shifts, right around the clock, for about two weeks I think the ship was in. It may have been three weeks because they overstayed to give us a lift, so that we would have this extra labour, because once they started getting stuff ashore, we started to erect it, you see. This was in the high summer. Eventually it became winter of course, and then it went through the winter, but by that time the ship had returned and we were locked up at Grillage Village, the 50 of us. It worked very well I think We had a good time up there actually. Everybody fitted in.

Track 7 [0:33:19] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you had got the structure up before the winter struck.*

Track 7 [0:33:23] Tony Baker: Yes, the structure was up. It was covered and weatherproofed and it was then down to just fitting the buildings out inside. Initially we lived in the roof of one of the buildings, over the kitchen, just in sleeping bags on the loft floor, with Lilos for comfort. So then we had to build the bunks in the bunkroom building, and the bathrooms, showers and so on. We had to fit out the garage and this infamous door. There were seven buildings actually: there was the kitchen. The kitchen was at one of the building and then it was a kind of general area and dining room. Then across a little passageway to the lounge and then along from that in this direction there was the bunkrooms. One building there of bunkrooms. I think it was two buildings of bunkrooms either side of this central corridor.

Track 8 [0:34:52] Chris Eldon Lee: *So there you were, working through the winter with no daylight to speak of.*

Track 8 [0:34:55] Tony Baker: No, none whatsoever.

Track 8 [0:34:57] Chris Eldon Lee: *With 50 guys, you think those 50 guys got on really well? Better than a British building site?*

Track 8 [0:35:03] Tony Baker: Well I think they did. As I have already pointed out to you, I have never worked on a building site, because I did not work in the building trade in this country, but I think we must have done actually, yes. I think we got along very well together.

Track 8 [0:35:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was that because there was no alternative? You were all shackled up together. True?*

Track 8 [0:35:28] Tony Baker: Possibly that was something to do with it, but I just felt that everybody was a nice guy, basically. They were all pretty good guys.

Track 8 [0:35:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *What do you make of Big Al?*

Track 8 [0:35:36] Tony Baker: Oh I love the guy, and his knowledge of building, of all sorts of building, every trade in the building sphere, is immense. I like Alan; he is a good mate. I got on very well with him.

Track 8 [0:35:57] Chris Eldon Lee: *Apart from the famous garage door, did it go smoothly?*

Track 8 [0:36:03] Tony Baker: I think it did, yes.

Track 8 [0:36:05] Chris Eldon Lee: *There ought to be a blue plaque on that garage door, shouldn't there?*

Track 8 [0:36:07] Tony Baker: There should actually, yes. Yes, I think it went down well to be honest. Everything went swimmingly. We kept one hut – I cannot remember which one it was now – but one hut was, we did not work in it until after the Midwinter because we built a stage at one end, and we had a review. That was good fun. There were several of us. I was involved in it and there were quite a few other people involved. I was not one of the major participants.

Track 8 [0:36:49] Chris Eldon Lee: *What do you remember about it? What sort of sketches and scenes were there?*

Track 8 [0:36:53] Tony Baker: There were all sorts of sketches. I cannot really remember. The one that I do remember is the one that I featured most prominently in. I was sitting on a stool on the stage with a bucket in front of me, and supposedly peeling spuds and complaining about my job to anybody that would listen to me. I am peeling these spuds and throwing them into the bucket and making an effort. The water is splashing out and every one that goes in, went in with feeling. It was a running joke; it went on through quite a few of the different sketches that were going on around me, to finish with me losing my rag with all this. I picked the bucket up (of course it had been swapped) and I threw it into the audience. It just had torn paper or something in it. So that is the thing that I find most memorable because I was involved in it. The other things, I am not too sure now.

Track 8 [0:38:08] Chris Eldon Lee: *So was there never friction in those winters in Halley? Did it ever get situations where people lost their rag slightly?*

Track 8 [0:38:15] Tony Baker: There was actually yes, but that was in my second year.

Track 8 [0:38:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *That will be in '65?*

Track 8 [0:38:23] Tony Baker: '65. We did have an undercurrent of discontent I suppose. I do not know really where it came from, truthfully, but we seemed to split up into them and us, and there was quite a lot of us who used to meet. We were the

'rebels' I suppose. We would meet late at night in the kitchen, complaining about everything, and you would have the others, the 'goodies', who would all be in bed by that time. I really do not know, even till today, what started all that, but it never developed into any fighting or anything like that.

Track 8 [0:39:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *So who or what were you rebelling against?*

Track 8 [0:39:22] Tony Baker: I do not know. I cannot remember.

Track 8 [0:39:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was this a survival issue?*

Track 8 [0:39:26] Tony Baker: No, no. I think it probably all started actually before I arrived back on base. I have not told you yet. I mentioned it earlier on, I alluded to the fact that I had gone out with a dog team.

Track 8 [0:39:49] Chris Eldon Lee: *Sorry we are going to come to that.*

Track 8 [0:39:51] Tony Baker: Well we would need to sort of jump back to it.

Track 9 [0:39:54] Chris Eldon Lee: *That is OK.*

Track 9 [0:39:56] Tony Baker: When I came back from seven months in the field, the Survey had sent down a new balloon shed. Like (almost) always, these things arrived on base with something short, something missing. On this occasion they had sent all the parts down, the nuts and bolts and so on, but no drawings showing you how to erect it. When I arrived back on base from the field, Rod Rhys Jones who was the new surveyor, just come in at that time, he had either taken charge or he had been given charge of starting to erect this building. He did a wonderful job because every day he had a radio sched with Stanley, and he spoke to Clem who was in Stanley Office. Clements known as Clem, and Clem had the drawings in the Stanley office and he would have a drawing in front of him, and he would say to Rod over the radio 'Imagine a square x feet by x feet, a rectangle, and in this corner you draw this for so many squares on a graph paper' type of thing, and he went through these drawings on a daily basis, giving him just enough to go out and start and put a bit more together.

Track 9 [0:41:40] Tony Baker: It went on like this for weeks, until eventually it was built correctly and it was up and running, but because of the way it was built, it was actually built 90 degrees wrong: out with the way the wind blows. On the traditional balloon shed, in those days, we used to blow a balloon up with hydrogen gas inside this thing, and then there is a big door at the side which you can open, and you walk out with this balloon, which was quite large, and there was a radiosonde and a radar target and so on hanging on a long string behind it. You would clear the building and then let it go. Well after 12 months, you could not do that because this door in the side of the building was snowed up, so then you had to resort to the roof and the roof was built to open up but because it had been built 90 degrees wrong, the wind would tend to catch the balloon as it came out and blow it into the open doors and burst it. If it had been built 90 degrees the other way, it would not have had the same effect.

Track 9 [0:43:00] Tony Baker: Once I got back on base, I did not take charge actually because he was already ofey with what was going on. I just did what he told me,

basically; of course I had my input as well. ‘Well I don’t think that goes like that because traditionally it would not be done that way.’ So we got this thing up, but I think that this undercurrent stems from that. People were disgruntled, and then with the next year’s field programme was upsetting folk. It was not proposed to do what those on base felt should be done. They were directed in different directions.

Track 9 [0:43:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *Because?*

Track 9 [0:43:54] Tony Baker: I do not know why to be honest. I could not tell you the reasons for this but these directions came from Head Office, so it upset people. I think that is where the... That was my understanding of it anyway. I never went into anything really very deeply. I tried to keep myself to myself in those things. But I was a member of the, I think they called them the “Nightriders”.

Track 9 [0:44:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *The dissidents?*

Track 9 [0:44:21] Tony Baker: The dissidents, yes. We used to gather in the kitchen and I would make a big pan of curry and everybody would tuck into this curry and drink. If there was any beer knocking around, they would drink beer; otherwise it would be coffee.

Track 9 [0:44:36] Chris Eldon Lee: *Let us move into the field, because part of the attraction for going to the Antarctic for you was to do some fieldwork with dogs.*

Track 9 [0:44:44] Tony Baker: Absolutely.

Track 9 [0:44:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *And you did?*

Track 9 [0:44:45] Tony Baker: I was very very fortunate that I did, yes, and I did not think that I would, having got the position, and gone down there and realised what I was doing, all of a sudden. I thought ‘Well, that’s me, out of the field activities.’

Track 10 [0:45:03] Chris Eldon Lee: *So what happened?*

Track 10 [0:45:04] Tony Baker: Well, in the August the new Base Leader of 1964 who was Dudley Jehan, came to me and asked me if I would like to go into the field (that there was a position) because everybody else was tied up with their own programmes, and they needed a man to go into the field. Would I like to do that? I snatched his hand off of course. So that is how I came to go into the field. We left base on September 10th. I think, 1964, to sledge the 340 miles to Pyramid Rocks which was the main depot in the Tottanfjella, Tottan Mountains. We had three Muskegs and three dog teams travelling together but because it was so early in the season, and we were travelling due east, and the wind blew incessantly from the east, right into our faces. So it was not long before we devised a method which allowed us to do this a little bit easier because the dogs did not like it. They were difficult to control. So we rigged up a system which in retrospect may have been a mistake, but it certainly made it easier for us to move, because we could move in weather conditions which we could not possibly have moved in had we just been driving the dogs on their own.

Track 10 [0:46:55] Tony Baker: What happened was: these Muskegs were pulling two or three sledges depending on the weight of the sledges and they were normally close-coupled together. But what we did was to uncouple two. There would be a sledge at the front and then we strung a wire hawser from the rear of that front sledge to the front of the rear two sledges some distance behind, and between the two we put the dog teams, just walking alongside this wire hawser. They were fixed to it, clipped to it. You never travel more than 1 or 1½ miles per hour, so it was quite within the dogs' capabilities and in fact, if the Muskeg had to stop for whatever reason the dogs used to keep on walking and they would pull these two sledges. Of course they were moving to start with, but they would pull these two sledges along behind them until they were forced to stop by reaching the forward sledge. That enabled us to have one... We had two men to each dog team; normally they would travel together, one either side of the sledge. This enabled us to, one driver to travel for an hour in the cab of the Muskeg and the other driver would sit on top of the front sledge facing the dog team behind, and he would keep an eye open for problems. He could jump on and off easily and attend to it while still moving and then get back onto his sledge. It was wonderful. You had your back to the wind – smashing. It did lead to further problems later on, the next year actually, but that was good that.

Track 10 [0:48:51] Tony Baker: We got to these mountains eventually, the three Muskegs and the three dog teams and then we split up. The Muskegs were just delivering stores along the route, petrol dumps and in the mountains food and fuel for ourselves to work. The dog teams split up then and went off to do the survey and the geology work, and we spent some weeks doing that until eventually Milne Samuel (a surveyor) and Dick Worsfold (a geologist); they had to come back to base to get the ship back to UK. They had done their two years and also Phil Cotton who had been appointed the new Base Leader for the following year, also had to come back to take over the new base after the ship had gone. So that left just four of us in the mountains (two teams and four men): a surveyor, Dai Wild; Lewie Jukes, geologist; Simon Russell the radio operator; and myself. We then spent the next five months or so swapping over. We would do a couple of months with one man and then swap and do a couple of months with the other fellow. We spent the whole of the summer then, traversing these ranges back and forth, doing survey and doing geology.

Track 11 [0:50:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *How was it for you in the field?*

Track 11 [0:50:42] Tony Baker: Well it was terrible initially because.... It really was my low point, or one of my very lowest points. We set out first of all from the base driving the dog teams. Eventually we had to give up because of the way these things work. We could not travel in the weather, but I and to a lesser extent Dai Wild who were driving this new dog team which I had picked up from Hope Bay originally. They were transferred in from Hope Bay to Halley Bay. Simon Russell and myself were on the *Shackleton* and we picked them up there and we took them down to Halley Bay. I thought that was the end of my attachment to the dogs but I got stuck with them again, and I just could not drive these dogs.

Track 11 [0:51:43] Tony Baker: It was the same as everything else. We never got much training in these things on base. People did not take you out and show you the ropes. My initial training in dog driving and camping techniques was one night before we set off on the major journey, with Dai Wild who was a fresher, the same as I was.

We were given this dog team, the Beatles. They said ‘Go out for a few miles, drive around, camp for the night and come back tomorrow. That was it. Then on this journey I just could not get the dogs to run; they would not go forward. It reduced me literally to tears. I wept. I thought ‘How am I going to cope with the next six months of this?’ It was an awful feeling and I was very very low with it, very very low. Eventually we adopted this different technique of travel and we got to the mountains.

Track 11 [0:53:00] Tony Baker: I moved then. I went to a different dog team with an experienced sledger and I found that fine. We did that for a few weeks and then I swapped back to the Beatles as we had called this dog team from Hope Bay. Phil Cotton and Milne Samuel came back to base; and me and Dai Wild went off into the wild blue yonder to further the survey work. These dogs: neither of us got much out of them. Dai, I must say, did a bit better than I did, but it was terrible. We had to relay loads constantly, half a sledge load. We would manage to get them a few miles ahead and dump the load, and then we would go back and pick the load up; doing that constantly. Then, all of a sudden after some weeks of this, we relayed a load, dropped it off and went back to our campsite and it was the last of the day. So we stayed with the campsite until the following morning. The following morning we broke camp and they never looked back. These dogs changed, literally overnight. We thought initially they were going very well. We thought ‘Well they are following our tracks from yesterday, so they are happy.’ But we got back to where we had dumped this stuff and we loaded it again, and off they went, never looked back. The rest of the six months or so that we were there in the mountains they were the most wonderful dog team imaginable. They did everything that you could ask of them.

Track 11 [0:54:51] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was that the big psychological change for you as well? Did you start enjoying it after that?*

Track 12 [0:54:55] Tony Baker: Absolutely. Yes. Oh yes we did, because it really was a worrying time up until that point, that we would not get any work done, the way we were going. It was a worrying time. It must have been even far more worrying for Dai who was there for a professional point of view. I was just there for the charlie, for the adventure.

Track 12 [0:55:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *So having wanted to go there for so many years, was it a let-down or did it exceed your expectations?*

Track 12 [0:55:28] Tony Baker: Oh it exceeded them in every way.

Track 12 [0:55:29] Chris Eldon Lee: *How do you mean?*

Track 12 [0:55:30] Tony Baker: Well I don’t know what I really mean by that, except to say that it was marvellous. To this day there is rarely a day passes without I think about what a happy time it was, a wonderful time. I do not remember the bad times, but we did have them. If I stop to think about them, as I have done now, then yes, there were bad times. But it is like all the summers when you were a child were sunny weren’t they? You never saw the rain as a child. I suppose it is something of that aspect. You remember the good times and the good times were many, and they really were very good times. Some of the things that we saw, the landscapes and so on. It was wonderful.

Track 12 [0:56:26] Chris Eldon Lee: *There are a couple of specific points to ask you about.*

Track 12 [0:56:29] Tony Baker: Yes?

Track 12 [0:56:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *When you went down South on the Shackleton, you spent some time in Stanley, apparently, before you went on. Were you working there?*

Track 12 [0:56:37] Tony Baker: That is right. Yes, I was. I did various things, actually, in Stanley. I worked in the BAS warehouse, fitting some shelves and things. But also another period I was designated to go with Phil Cotton who was the surveyor. Phil was making a town plan, so I spent some weeks (I am not sure how long; it was quite a long time, actually), spent with Phil, walking around the town with chain measures and posts: and him and his tripod and his theodolite, measuring elevations and distances and so on, making a town plan of Stanley and the environs. So that was quite an undertaking there.

Track 12 [0:57:36] Chris Eldon Lee: *And you spent some time on board Shackleton doing seismic work?*

Track 12 [0:57:39] Tony Baker: Yes.

Track 12 [0:57:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *Which came to a rather sudden end, apparently?*

Track 12 [0:57:42] Tony Baker: Well it did. Initially the idea of this seismic work was that we, in tandem with *HMS Protector*... The *Protector*, being a Royal Naval ship, they had charge of the explosives. So we would sail out and we had a hydrophone on the end of a long cable which we were dragging behind us. I do not know the technicalities of it all but every so often they would throw a charge of dynamite over the stern of the *Protector* and explode it, and we would record the seismograph records. This went on for a little while until, eventually, they had a premature explosion on the *Protector*.

Track 12 [0:58:36] Chris Eldon Lee: *Actually on board?*

Track 12 [0:58:37] Tony Baker: Yes, and two of the sailors were killed. I think it was two, and some injured. That finished their activities. They set sail immediately and went back to Stanley, I think, possibly to Montevideo (I am not sure). But they left the area and so they devised a scheme whereby we on the *Shackleton* would do both jobs. That was damned hard work and cold and miserable. We had this long cable with the hydrophone on the end of it, and what we had to do, because of circumstances: we would let the cable out and then they dropped the charge over the back and exploded it, and then we would have to pull the cable back on board, and it was several hundred feet long, this cable. Quite a heavy cable and of course you were pulling the seawater in with it. You were saturated in freezing cold seawater; your gloves were sodden and we had to walk back and to, from the stem to the stern, laying this cable out in a straight line. I suppose they checked that the hydrophone was in order and then we would let it out again and they would throw another charge over.

Track 13 [1:00:10] Tony Baker: That went on for several days, doing that, and it was damned hard work that was. It was bitterly cold and wet and not very enjoyable. Maybe I am wrong on this, but I always like to think that it is coming to fruition now with the oil that they are discovering in that area because these seismic records must have shown things like that up, at the time; shown that it was worthwhile delving a little deeper into these things. I was only told today, on my way down here, that they have actually announced that they have discovered oil, within the last month in the Falkland Islands. That is news to me today.

Track 13 [1:00:59] Chris Eldon Lee: *What do you think was your scariest moment down South? Was there a time when you were fearing for your safety or sanity?*

Track 13 [1:01:08] Tony Baker: There was one time; I was with Lewie Jukes at the time. We had changed again, sledging companions. Lewie and I were sledging together and we had gone to a place which we called the Stella Nunataks. They are not called that on the maps today. It is in Norwegian territory and they have got some Norwegian name on them [Transcriber comment: They are now called Mannefallknausane. Andy Smith] but we called them the Stella Nunataks. We had gone to visit these and it started to snow very very heavily and we were in the lee of these nunataks. We were getting it deeper and deeper and deeper. It snowed for about ten days or more, incessantly, and when eventually it did stop snowing we could not move while it was like that; we could not do anything. To be honest I do not think we actually did any geology there – we never got onto a piece of rock – but it was time to return to base.

Track 13 [1:02:16] Tony Baker: So eventually when the snow stopped falling, we broke camp to try and make our way. We were at the bottom of this hill in the lee of these nunataks and the only way we could move was for one of us to walk ahead of the dogs and then walk back down next to our original track, making a double track and then walk ahead again making three tracks, making them as wide as you could. We did this until you got tired basically, and could not go any further, and then you would turn round and you would call the dogs. The remaining man would be at the back, pushing like hell on the sledge, and the dogs would go and they would get as far as you were. We did a mile in 8 hours and it was back-breaking work as you can imagine, and we decided that we would have to wait for the snow to harden up or whatever. We were rewarded eventually. The wind did start to blow and it blows the snow away, basically. What is left it hardens into a surface that you can run on.

Track 13 [1:03:32] Tony Baker: But it was while we were down there before this actual movement began – we were waiting for the snow to ease off and to finish – and we were stuck in our tent. We virtually ran out of paraffin. What little bit of paraffin we did have we had to conserve for when we started to move because we would need the paraffin then, to make a hot drink and to make hot food for the journey. But while we were just lying in our tent, basically we starved. We would put a cup of snow into your sleeping bag and it would eventually melt and give you a little drop of water to drink, but even worse, we ran out of dog food completely. We could not feed the dogs for a week or more. That really was heart-breaking, to hear them crying of hunger. They wanted something to eat and we had not got anything to give them. We did in fact give them tins of butter and stuff like that, that we had. We were not short of

food; we were short of the wherewithal to cook it, but we had ample, sufficient food to give them some, but not enough to satisfy them. That was a low point because it was a little worrying, wondering whether... We were fifty miles or so from our depot, and wondering whether we would get out of it. We did, fortunately. We got out of it and we got back to the base. The other two people, Dai Wild and Simon Russell, had been at the depot several days, waiting for us and wondering where we were. They were becoming a little bit worried.

Track 14 [1:05:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *It says here you were feeding the dogs their own faeces. Is that right?*

Track 14 [1:05:34] Tony Baker: Yes. I did not know whether you wanted to hear that one or not. [laughs] Yes. If one of us had to go and do something... There was one dog in particular, Wilfred this dog's name was, and he seemed to suffer from the hunger more than the others. He certainly made more howling noises. We would pick it on the shovel and throw it to him and he would wolf it.

Track 14 [1:06:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *Your faeces?*

Track 14 [1:06:01] Tony Baker: Yes. He would just wolf it down.

Track 14 [1:06:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *I think we have to stop for food now.* [both laugh] *That has been marvellous Tony. Thank you very much indeed.*

Track 14 [1:06:10] ENDS

Snippets:

- Building the new office block.. Track 3 [0:13:41]
- Don't put nails in your mouth. Track 4 [0:18:24]
- Fitting out the Grillage Village bar. Track 5 [0:22:44]
- The garage door too low for Muskeg tractors. Track 6 [0:25:34]
- The Midwinter 1967 review. Track 8 [0:36:53]
- New balloon shed supplied with no plans. Track 9 [0:39:56]
- The 'Nightriders'. Track 9 [0:43:54]
- Running dog teams with tractors. Track 10 [0:45:04]
- Prioblems with the Beatles dog team. Track 11 [0:50:42]
- Accident on the *HMS Protector*. Track 12 [0:57:42]
- Nearly running out of fuel. Track 13 [1:03:32]
- Feeding dogs human waste. Track 14 [1:05:30]