

British Antarctic Survey Archives
Oral History Recording No. 7

A recording of Mr Peter Starling, Wireless Operator and mechanic at Base F, Argentine Islands, for the winters 1950 and 1951, in conversation with Miss Joanna Rae, Assistant Archivist of the British Antarctic Survey.

Date : 24 November 1989

Location : BAS Headquarters, Cambridge

Part 1 (A)

Joanna Rae : Peter, could you tell me something about your early career and how you came to join FIDS.

Peter Starling : Yes, I, er, I started life, I went to sea when I was fifteen, um, originally as a deck boy, um, in the Merchant Service, that was in 1942, during the war. Er, and er, I became a deck hand, and then I was proposed for officer training and, much to my great regret, found that I had defective eyesight, my eyesight was poor. I didn't wear glasses in those days. Um, so the only career prospect open to me, er, at sea then was to become a radio officer, which sounds very grand. It wasn't as grand as all that. The war was on, a lot of people sort of lost track of the enormous casualties the Merchant Service had during the war, they were far higher than any of the other services.

Joanna Rae : Where were you operating?

Peter Starling : In the North Atlantic, largely, and to Russia. Er, and, my wireless training took exactly six weeks and I was back at sea as a radio officer. When the war ended, I'd been twice torpedoed, I was the senior radio officer of a tanker. But I was only eighteen, er.

Joanna Rae : Sounds as though you'd got a whole story about that.

Peter Starling : To, er, finish your career at eighteen didn't sound very brilliant. I still was, had my heart set on a career at sea, so I left the sea and joined a marine engine company, Doxfords of Sunderland, as an apprentice, with the intention of returning to sea as a marine engineer. Um, just as I was reaching the end of my apprenticeship in what was then the Manchester Guardian, that's right, was an advert for someone to join FIDS. I'd never heard of FIDS, I didn't realise that there was anyone in Antarctica at the time, and I applied.

Joanna Rae : What attracted you to that?

Peter Starling : Oh, I mean I had always been fascinated by Antarctica. I had read most of the. My great hero still to this day, my great hero is Shackleton. I mean I think there is no man alive like Shackleton and, I've read Shackleton's books, I've read Scott's books, I've read about Amundsen. I don't know if his book was then translated into English, but I'd

certainly read about him and I knew a fair bit about Antarctica. And I was a fairly keen hill walker and the Antarctic was the obvious attraction.

Joanna Rae : So you filled what you wrote.

Peter Starling : I filled in, as far as I remember, I can't recall now, but I think I must have filled in an application form. Anyway, I got invited to London for an interview. I suppose I was naive in some senses, although I'd been about a bit as a seaman. I had no ideas of the ways of the business world and things. I thought if anybody was going to pay my fare all the way to London that I must be in. And I went. The interview was in two parts, I can remember. They asked me to go first to a firm called Priest, Cardew and Ryder, who were consultant engineers (I think they still are in fact), in London, for the technical interview. Um, I can remember it being not very strong. The bloke just looked at my Post Master General's certificate and said, he said "Do you know much about engines?" and I said "Well, motor bikes are one of my hobbies and I've ridden for Britain in the International Six Days Trial". That was the end of the technical interview. The interview for FIDS was in, when I look at this building I can hardly believe it. I think FIDS had one office, or shared, or part of an office, in the Crown Agents in Millbank, and the actual FIDS interview was there. Um, it was with a bloke who - I didn't know who he was at the time, it turned out to be Frank Elliott who was then Assistant Secretary FIDS.

Joanna Rae : It was just the one person?

Peter Starling : No, there was a lady there, whose name for the life of me I cannot remember. She was the only permanent UK employee of FIDS. All I can remember about her was a) she was very attractive and b) that her husband worked for the BBC. She'd left when I came home from Antarctica, as far as I remember that was the only time I saw her. The funny part about it is, actually, truly, they said to me "If you are appointed, Mr Starling, when would you be able to leave?" And being a sailor, I mean I was accustomed and had been for a lot of years to being told at the shipping office, "Well, you know, she's down at King George V Dock and sailing in half an hour, get yourself down there." Um, they said, "When would you be able to leave?" and I said, "Oh, that's a little bit awkward, I came on my motorbike and I've have to sell the bike, I'd have to get across to Pryde and Clarke", who were then motor cycle agents in Marble Arch area, "I'd have to get across to Pryde and Clarke to sell my bike. I suppose I could leave in about an hour". And I can remember them both falling about in fits of laughter. I think they were expecting me to - . And I also had a medical in Harley Street, the one time in my life I've ever been in Harley Street, but I can remember having a medical in Harley Street.

Joanna Rae : Was that done on the same day?

Peter Starling : Yes, yes, it was all done on the same day.

Joanna Rae : And when did you finally sail?

Peter Starling : I then went home. I can't remember how long after I was told I'd been accepted, but I then was asked to go to Coventry Climax in Coventry, for a week's familiarisation with the generators. We were supposed to have. In actual fact, when I got to Climax, they had a strike on, er, so that nobody knew what the hell to do with me, I just sort of hung about for a week. Er, and because of the strike those generators never appeared

anyway. The thing I can remember most about it was that in the test bed at Climax, where they tested these engines, they had of all things, petrol, it actually came out of a pipe. All you did was connect onto the pipe and turn the tap on and petrol came out; and of course petrol was very, very severely rationed at the time. To get a gallon of petrol for a motor bike was a marvellous thing. I had this tap, I thought I'd landed in heaven. Um, and that was it and I think the following... I didn't travel out on the Biscoe, the old Biscoe, the original Biscoe, she was a wooden built ship, an ex boom defence net layer, I believe that she'd previously been HMS Pretext. Um, she had very limited accommodation, well she had plenty, she had the accommodation, but it was, it was very, very tight, the bunks for the FIDS were, if I remember right, were in four tiers, four, one above the other. There was only about two foot between them. And she only had a passenger certificate for, I think I'm right in saying, 15 people. So that we couldn't all sail on her and five of us, er, four of us who happened to be wireless operators. I can remember the names, there was Bill Calder, Dave Juke, Tommy Burgess and myself and another chap called Roy Crampton, a general assistant, um, went out to Montevideo as passenger on Highland Princess, one of the Royal Mail liners.

Joanna Rae : So that was more comfortable?

Peter Starling : Oh, by far, it was unbelievably comfortable. Um, Britain in 1949 was still a, a not very wonderful place and rationing was still, still very strict, everything was either rationed or, or ungettable and this ship, I can still remember it, the breakfast menu was actually two or three pages on the menu, for breakfast. It was almost unbelievable. Ah, It was a wonderful trip out, er, and I had been to South America before in my seagoing days, so that I was, I became the, I don't know, the guide to the delights of Rio de Janeiro and places.

Joanna Rae : So how old were you at that time?

Peter Starling : Twenty two. Twenty two. Er, and then we eventually arrived at Montevideo. I think the Biscoe had not arrived. I think she arrived the following day. But anyway, we were put in a, in a hotel in Montevideo. All of us, not only the ones who'd come out by passenger liner, but all the FIDS were put in this hotel for a few days, um. The story was, I don't know whether it was true or not, that whenever the Biscoe was due, I mean Montevideo was a city of considerable size. They reckon they used to reinforce the police force. They certainly needed to. I, I, I managed to make jail. We went to some nightclub and there was a doorman at the door with a very fancy hat, it was like an Admiral's cap with gold braid and everything. And we decided that it would be great fun to own this cap. And we mounted an almost military operation, one chap would attract his attention and somebody else would attract the attention of the, the er, the er bouncers, and I would snatch the cap, which duly happened, and I was beating it down the street with this gold trilby when I was arrested.

Joanna Rae : You were arrested?

Peter Starling : They had a, a very practical way of treating this. You spent one night in the police cells and then swept the streets of Montevideo the following morning. And then they released you. Er, so I, I managed to clean the streets in Montevideo for an hour or two. Er, and I think after about four days or thereabouts. I can remember that during that period fell Armistice Night, er, November 11th, and a lot of us were asked to a party given by the Montevideo branch of the British Legion. And for the release, the relief of Base E, FIDS didn't of course have aircraft in those days but Base E at Marguerite Bay the previous year

they had failed to get in with the ship. Er, so people who were due to be relieved then had now done three years and, er, we had two aircraft specifically for the relief of Base E if the ship didn't get through and the air crew were RAF, seconded to FIDS. The Chief Pilot was a fellow called John Lewis, um, which indirectly I'm still in touch with. Er, he was the Chief Pilot, but in fact the pilots who did most of ... the RAF, though they had lots of people then who'd flown Lancasters over the Ruhr and things, had nobody familiar with, with Arctic work, so they'd seconded a Canadian bush pilot called Pete St. Louis and they'd given him a temporary commission, I think, in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was a terrible fellow, he was actually a marvellous pilot and I can remember him going to this, this Armistice Night dinner dressed in his Royal Air Force uniform with a red and black checked mackinose shirt on. The two mechanics were, were also serving RAF people on, Jock Bodis and Ken Hunt, they were both what the RAF call ex Holton Brats, ie they'd been apprentices at the, at Holton and, er, they were both very fine aircraft engineers, totally different in character. Bodis was a typical little Glasgow tough, er, but a very good fitter. Ken Hunt was a tall, distinguished looking and very gentlemanly sort of chap, they were completely opposites.

Joanna Rae : Yes, you wonder how one of them must have got on with the Canadian, really, it must have been quite extraordinary.

Peter Starling : Yes, Bodis, I can always remember, em. He, he, he hated the cold and he hated sea planes. He was always moaning about this and I said to him one day, why did he come here and he said, "I'll tell you". He said, "I was given the, the opportunity of two postings" he said. "One was back to Holton as an instructor and the other was here" and he said "I used to lie awake at night and think of the tricks we'd played on instructors as apprentices and lie in a blue sweat of fear and, and I'd rather be here any day". So that was, er, Bodis. And, er, then we eventually joined the Biscoe and sailed for Port Stanley in the, in the Falklands.

Joanna Rae : So you arrived at the Falklands eventually and into Stanley?

Peter Starling : Yes, um, actually, to go back to it a little bit. Just, just before leaving, there'd been I suppose what there always is, a little bit in the local paper in the town I came from, saying, you know, local man goes to Antarctica.

Joanna Rae : Which town was that?

Peter Starling : Darlington. And I came home from work this night and standing outside the house was a policeman. And in those days I was young and I rode a motorbike and policemen were my sort of natural enemies. And he said, "Excuse me, are you Peter Starling" and I said, "yes". And he said "Oh," he said "I believe you're going to the Falklands?". And I said, "Yes, I believe I am". And he had been, had served in the Falklands as a telegraphist on the wireless station in the Falklands during the war, in the Navy. And eventually we went out for an evening together, had a few beers and he had told me all about the Falklands. And one of things I can remember he'd told me was, slightly disreputable, but there was only one lady of ill repute in the Falklands, who went by the marvellous name of Sea Lion Mary. Her proper name was Mary Ben. And I can remember him saying that if you've had a few beers she looks absolutely lovely. And the first night we were in Stanley, there was the usual thing, this dance was, was given for visiting strangers and we went along. And there, the only girl as far as I can remember in the hall in a, in a long dress was this girl in a long white light .. and I went and asked her to dance and I had had something to drink,

obviously too much to drink, because I said to her, "What's your name?" and she said "Mary Ben" and I said, "Oh, I've heard of you, you're Sea Lion Mary". She took one step back and, and whacked me across the ear. And overnight I sort of became fairly famous around the Falklands and people for years after used to say to me "What on earth did you do to make Sea Lion Mary beat you over the ear in the middle of the dance?"

Joanna Rae : This was your first night or something?

Peter Starling : This was the first night in the Falklands. Um, but I actually, I thought the islands were, were marvellous, I thought it was a wonderful place and we had a marvellous time there, the people were really, really looked after us and were friendly to us and . . . I think we were there about a week, er, FIDS had stores over at the other side of Stanley Harbour at a thing called the Camber and were rolling extra stores and stuff over the Camber. Because of having the two aircraft, we also had with us, um, an RFA, Royal Fleet Auxiliary, ship that year called the Gold Ranger, carrying largely aviation benzine for the, for the two aircraft. And she would have accompanied the Biscoe as far as Deception Island.

Joanna Rae : So she was chartered, was she?

Peter Starling : I suppose so, em, yes I would think so, or loaned by the Fleet Auxiliary. And also, to cover the relief was a Reuters correspondent, a chap called Douglas Liversidge, we all called him Liversausage. Em, he subsequently wrote a book, um, called "White Horizon". It was quite a good book. I don't know how he wrote it because, poor chap, I've never ever met anybody who suffered from sea sickness like him. And the old Biscoe was dreadful. I mean, I was an old sailor, I'd spent a lot of time in the North Atlantic on small ships and things, but even I found the Biscoe pretty rough. Most of the other FIDS who were ex RAF largely and Army and things, there were only I think a couple of sailors amongst us, they found it dreadful and poor Liversidge just was prostrate with, with seasickness.

Anyway, we sailed for Deception. We'd been sorted out by that time as to which bases we were going to, er, and I was going to Base F, which was Argentine Island.

Joanna Rae : Was that the first time you knew that?

Peter Starling : Yes, we didn't know, it was, I think it was sorted out in the FIDS office in Stanley. Er, I can always, the one thing I can remember that Eric Salmon and I, Eric had a career throughout I think with BAS and has just left them, in fact I've just been with him this morning. Eric and I got on very well from the day we very first met and we asked if we could go to the same base together. This, I gather, both of us were inclined to be practical jokers and had initiated a number of practical jokes around Stanley and things and I think they thought it was perhaps a good idea to separate us. Anyway, we didn't, Eric I think went to Signy, it was either Signy or Admiralty Bay. I went to F, where I was very pleased to go because when E was closed, F became the most southerly base and I think the only base left that year with dogs and sledging equipment. We didn't have any sledging programme but nobody bothered too much about that. Um, we just did what we wanted to do and sometimes we told the office in Stanley about it afterwards.

But I was anyway down for F and on that first trip of the Biscoe we didn't get to Base F, er, we went to Deception, Signy, Admiralty Bay and South Georgia and during the time measles broke out aboard the Biscoe, a quite severe outbreak of measles and large numbers of

people went down with the measles. I, it was, it was great for me because they were, they were short of crew, at least half the crew had had measles and I, I can remember in one day working in the engine room, relieving in the engine room, taking a trick at the, at the wheel as a seaman, and relieving Bill Bonner, the sparks on the radio. It was fine, I don't think I'd get it anywhere else but the Biscoe, that this had gone on. And we eventually arrived back in Stanley, I don't know when but certainly in time for New Year's Eve because I can remember very distinctly the, the New Year's Eve celebrations and things in Stanley.

Joanna Rae : Were you put up in a hotel when you were in Stanley?

Peter Starling : Er, No, we, there was a tradition, tradition – it couldn't have been very old, but there was a tradition that the sort of, um, ex patriot British residents who largely lived along past Government House in an area of Stanley which was always called Little Italy, would offer hospitality to, to FIDS. But we, er, Archie Walker and Eric Salmon, myself, had - the food on the Biscoe, I might say, was awful, the food was dreadful and we had found a town, a shop, a house in the town, 7 Fitzroy Road, where Mrs Brecon, who was the owner, did excellent meals, and we used to go and have lunch there. So we arranged to be put up at the Brecons. They also had a daughter called Jean, which was an attraction to us. But, so we lodged at the Brecons in 7 Fitzroy Road. Er, and then eventually, it must have, really I should have kept a diary but I didn't. I suppose it must have been mid-January, we, we left for, we first called in at Deception, then went South from Deception, opened the base at Lockroy, Admiralty Bay - not Admiralty Bay - Port Lockroy, Base A, where I was separated from my other great mate, Archie Walker. He stayed at Base A and I went on down to F. And F had been open then a year, I think. Er, three of the people were leaving, so there were three new ones and one chap who'd been a year there, a marvellous chap who I'll be seeing again this evening, called Murdo Finlayson Tate, was staying on for a fourth year.

Joanna Rae : For a fourth year?

Peter Starling : No, for his second year.

Joanna Rae : So, did they do that deliberately, so there would be some continuity?

Peter Starling : No, I don't think so. It would obviously have been desirable, it was just, just the luck of the draw, who was leaving and who wasn't and things. A, for instance they were all certainly new, I think, Base B, Deception, they were all new, but it just happened that Murdo. Murdo was a most interesting, and is a most interesting fellow. He'd been a lighthouse keeper, keeper on Skerry for light. He came from Wick up in the far north of Scotland and he'd gone out to the Falklands, not for FIDS, he'd gone out to the Falklands to work as a, as a hand on one of the sheep farms and he'd joined FIDS in the Falklands. He had two or three [inaudible]. I thought I was fairly tough and fairly, could walk and things, but Murdo, Murdo would go off for a wee daunder on his skis. He would never go with anybody else, he just used to disappear by himself, and he'd go about forty miles and come back. It was an enormous thing. And the other feature was, the first time I ever saw him he was sat quietly in the corner with an embroidery frame doing embroidery and I thought, struth, a bunch of queers or something. He did the most beautiful handwork, which is characteristic I think of, of the old breed of lighthouse keepers. They used to do this. And his rope work and, work, I mean I again thought mine as a seaman was fairly good, but Murdo's was actually, was, was a work of art, it was beautiful.

So there were four of us at F. There was Harry Heywood, the base leader, Norman Broadbeer, the meteorologist, Murdo, the general assistant, and myself, the wireless operator/mechanic. Norman, well I suppose everybody was a character, but Norman was a character in a totally different way. He lived, ate and slept met. He had no interest in anything else. And this is actually true, he'd been working as a, as a met assistant at London airport when the, the advert had gone on the boards saying volunteers were wanted for the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey. And one of his colleagues had said to him, "By jove, Norman, there'll be some interesting met work to do there". So Norman had volunteered. He had his interview, he'd accepted the job, he'd joined the Biscoe before he realised he wasn't going to the Outer Hebrides. He thought he was going to Scotland. And as far as I'm aware, throughout his two years, he got up every morning, shaved, put on his collar and tie and behaved exactly the same as he would in the Met Office at home. He was a character.

[REDACTED]

Joanna Rae : [REDACTED]

Peter Starling : [REDACTED] I mean the, the hut was only 12 foot square, which is about the size of this office, I suppose. There were four of us living in this space.

Joanna Rae : Was this living and sleeping?

Peter Starling : Yes, yes. There was a hut square, 12 foot by 12, there was a sort of partition went across, about three-quarters of the way along, on one side of which was a Nussy cooker, er, and that side constituted the kitchen, I suppose it was about the width of, you know, between the desk and the wall here. The other side was the living room, with four bunks built into the walls and a Nussy room heater. There wasn't a lot of space, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Joanna Rae : I should think you needed to do something like that to cope with that really.

Peter Starling : It was a very, it was rather a sad situation. Strangely enough, many, many years later, thirty years later, I went on some management symposium, and there was a chap there from the Crown Agents, who was saying the Crown Agents were, of course, the world's most professional recruiters and in, I don't know how many years or centuries of

recruiting they had never ever recruited the wrong person for the job. And I was able to stand up at the back of the hall and say, you know, I actually spent a year in Antarctica with a chap you recruited for it, [REDACTED] And I think he, he wished I'd go somewhere else.

Joanna Rae : Yes, I expect he did.

Peter Starling : Anyway, that was it. Life at F. That year was not, it had its better side, but it was not too good, largely because of this [REDACTED] Er, Murdo, Tate and I used to travel a fair bit, er.

Joanna Rae : This was just deciding where you thought it would be useful to go, was it? Or just sort of jollies?

Peter Starling : I don't know about useful, it was where we thought we'd like to go. I mean we had, well the numbers kept varying because pups would be born, and dogs, or the dogs would die, or several accidents and things. But, the dogs needed exercise and training and so on and we just decided we'll, we'll shove off across to Cape Tucson and down the coast and then. Norman, a) – he's, well it was very useful, a)his duties as a meteorologist demanded that he didn't. He, he learned to use the radio sufficiently to pass the met forecast to, to Tommy Burgess at Lockroy and so Murdo and I, went off a bit, but it was not too happy on base that year, which was a pity.

Joanna Rae : Quite a rude sort of entry into Antarctic life, really, to be.

Peter Starling : I suppose it was, really, but at the end of the year, we'd. There was. As I said the awkward part about it was that [REDACTED] [REDACTED] One day, I don't think they kept the codes of other bases other than lying round the hut, sort of. And one day, Bill Calder at Deception said "Eh, you know what this is you're sending, do you?". I said, "no". He said, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Murdo Tate, of course, left as well at the end of his two years. John Green, who had travelled out with us and been the base leader at Deception for a year, came as the base leader to, to F. To my, or our mutual, delight Archie Walker, my old mate, came as the surveyor, came from Lockroy. And we got a fifth member, a fellow called Joe Lewis.

The first problem, of course, was what the hell, where the hell was he going to sleep. Because. And there was a window across that end wall. And the only place we could find to put a bunk for Joe was above this window. There literally was a space of about eighteen inches between the window and the. So.. And we called this "The Flying Pit". It wasn't a bed. This thing was up in the ceiling. [text undecipherable]... couldn't turnover. If he wanted to turn over he had to get out of bed. And it was a. And I think this coloured my whole views of Antarctica. We had a marvellous year, I don't think we had a wrong word. The five of us got on like wildfire, we had a marvellous time. We were all, um.

Well, one amazing thing was that, with the exception of Joe, four of us had all, in different capacities, and different things, served in the Middle East. John had been a captain

in an infantry regiment, Archie Walker was air crew, the desert Air Force. I'd served around the coast of Italy, Libya and Norman had been a met, meteorologist at Woody Halfer. And a lot of the talk in the hut was, "Hey, remember that belly dancer that there was in the Derby bar," you know. It was, it was great. We used to make quite considerable site trips, I mean they were all, I think, totally unofficial, nobody told us where to go or what to do or anything. We just decided we would go.

Joanna Rae : Did you have any instructions on what you were supposed to achieve in a year, or ?

Peter Starling : Well, the only instruction I think we had was the, was the meteorology. They wanted three-hourly met reports. Not transmitting three-hourly but taking three-hourly and transmitting back to Stanley, um, three times a day. We didn't communicate with Stanley three times a day, we just used to send them to one base, generally poor old Bill Calder at Base B - at Deception because - he was north of us. We couldn't actually, if we'd wanted to, have got in touch with Stanley directly for most of the year. The limitations on the radio were such that we couldn't, but we could normally get Base B, er, and he would then collate them and pass them on to Stanley. That, as far as I know, was the only instruction.

Joanna Rae : So what about the surveyor? Did he have any guidelines on what he was supposed to survey?

Peter Starling : No, I mean, I don't think anybody knew anything much about south of us, so we just surveyed southwards, actually. Um, Even today, I'm surprised, when I think of it I'm surprised to have lived through it. I remember on one occasion, we needed of course seal meat for the dogs and, to some extent for ourselves. We could have lived without it, not the dogs. And the seals all disappeared during the height of the winter and they appeared again in large numbers around the Argentine islands around September when they come out to calve. And we were very low in dog food and John Green and I would go off with the sledge and, er, try and get some seals. I should have known better, because John was, John was accident prone without a doubt. But off we went and we did find a seal, very reluctantly killed her because she had a pup and we didn't wish to but the dogs were, we were down to having virtually nothing to feed them on. So we killed her and the pup, because it wouldn't have lived anyway, left them there to collect on the way back and went looking for more. The sledge had nothing on it, it was light, we were just going to bring the seals back. John was actually driving the sledge and I was sitting on it. And there was a line of what was fairly obviously thin ice. And John just suddenly attempted to cross it. And there was a crash and both of us, and all the dogs and the sledge, um, were in the water. Er, And I, quickly through my mind I can still remember going during the war, I'd gone on convoys to Russia and I can remember us being given a briefing before going that said under no circumstances, if you can possibly avoid it, do you abandon ship, because your life expectation in the water is less than two minutes, or something stupid. I can remember going through this and thinking, "Crikey, I've got two minutes".

Anyway, I, not through presence of mind, but purely by accident, turned round, swam back the way we'd come, where the ice was fairly firm and without any difficulties or, scrambled out onto the ice. John kept hold of the sledge bars and, and the dogs paddled away and he was at the far side of this hole trying to get out on to the thin ice that kept breaking away from him. And I crawled across to him, "John, you'll have to come". And then it occurred to me, I didn't even know whether he could swim. I mean, I'd known him for a

couple of years, but had no reason to know whether he could swim. However, fortunately he could swim and this rubbish about being two minutes in the water is just that, is rubbish. Because, I was certainly more than two minutes in the water and John must have been, em, ten minutes in the water.

Joanna Rae : So the sledge hadn't pulled the dogs down?

Peter Starling : No, the sledge is wood and it floated. It actually turned over, the handlebars and the weight of the stuff in the sledge bag come and the handlebars rolled it over. It was upside down in the water. And the dogs were still attached to it by their traces. They actually scrambled out on to the thin ice on the far side, but couldn't get any further because the sledge was in the water. And, er, then we were out at the, on the full ice at the side of the hole. Um, we were then in a very difficult position, because we were about five miles away from the base, I think, with temperatures, very low, it was about -40 or something. Our windproofs just froze like, sort of, sheets of armour. Um, Neither of us, we both had skis but they were on the sledge, they were lashed to the sledge which was in the water, so we were without skis. And we set off to walk back to base, um. Fortunately, part way we came back to the seal that we'd already killed and it was still warm and we, we warmed ourselves a little bit by shoving our hands into the carcass of this seal. And, I'm not sure whether we'd have made base. I think we would, but I'm not too sure. But, Norman the meteorologist had been out doing the met ob, which was on top of the hill on the top of Winter Island. He had a sunshine recorder up there, gone up there, and seen these two figures heading back er, so Jock and Joe had harnessed up another dog team and sledge and come out and got us.

I actually suffered no ill effects whatsoever. I was bloody cold. Um, but I came back in the hut and had a cup of cocoa and changed my clothes. I was fine. John got fairly bad frostbite, but he was in the water a lot longer than me. And then, er, Jock Walker and I went back to where it had happened, to try and recover the sledge and the dogs. We couldn't recover the sledge, but um, the water had, had frozen over again and the sledge was frozen into this very thin ice that wouldn't, wouldn't stand us. But by fastening a knife onto a long pole, we managed to cut the trace that attached the dogs to the sledge and all but one of them came bounding to us in great joy. The other one decided to go the other way and we never saw him again. But we got, I think there were eleven of them, we got ten of them back, so it was better than nothing.

The funny part about it, if there is a funny part about this, funny about John's frostbite was that. Of course, we didn't have a doctor. There was a doctor, er, at one of the other places, I think it was Signy, I can't remember. But certainly, there was a doctor at one of the other bases and we were able to get medical advice from them.

Joanna Rae : Could you contact Signy direct?

Peter Starling : By radio, yes. And I was, I had been sort of, I don't know, appointed to doctor. I think I had a first aid badge in the Boy Scouts or something, so that, I was the, the unofficial doctor. And I was looking after Joe and also I was, I suppose it was easier for me to use the radio than anybody else. And I was getting medical advice from the doctor. I was getting this in Morse, you know, to their radio operator. And the doctor was obviously standing beside the operator. And all of a sudden, they must have decided that the conditions, the radio conditions, were good enough to use RT, because without saying anything to me, all

of a sudden over the loudspeaker came the doctor's voice, who said, "Well, it looks pretty bad, Pete, it looks as though you might have to amputate". And John was lying right beside. And from that moment, he made a quite miraculous recovery. I mean, the thought of me cutting his bloody foot off was, was more than, than he, he fancied, that was, so.

Joanna Rae : So, you would use Morse Code if, if the weather conditions were poor?

Peter Starling : We normally used Morse, Morse 90%. In fact, the radios we had did not have an art - transmitters didn't have a radio telephone facility. They only had a Morse facility. But somebody a bit cleverer than me, one of the other operators, had designed a little circuit that you could make up yourself on the base to, to, so we all had these home made, you know, made on a block of wood.

Part 1 (B)

Peter Starling : You can see from the lists that we didn't have a cook or anything like that, and we used to take it in turns, of, of week about, to be cook, and you may think that, well everything comes out of a tin or is dehydrated, there's not a lot of cooking can be done. But, um, there was some considerable amount of ingenuity. Baking in particular was the, baking was the thing. I mean you could,er. And afternoon tea on the base became the, the meal of the day, and. I would never advocate having. Having had this experience, I would never advocate having a cook on base, because however good a cook is, even if you go and stay in a, in a first class hotel, after a week or a month or so, it begins to get a little the same, however good the, the chef is. Here, the sense of competition used to come into it, you know, and. We had some, I'm not going to pretend they were all good, we had some amazing. One of them, mine I think was perhaps the most spectacular. Do you remember, there used to be a paper called, well I think there still is, called "The Daily Mirror", and in the "Daily Mirror", there was a strip cartoon of Patsy, who showed you how to cook in strip cartoon format. Does it still exist?

Joanna Rae : I don't know, I don't have the "Mirror".

Peter Starling : Well, anyway, Patsy, was in it. And we had a year's supply of overseas "Daily Mirror's". They were, of course, a year out of date, but we had a year's supply of these things. And I can remember on one occasion, when I wasn't the book, paging through one of these and there was a recipe for fried dough, and I thought, "Oh, now that's good. Next time I'm the cook I'll make that", you see. And of course, needless to say next time I was cook I couldn't find the thing. I mean the hut was always a bit of a bloody pigsty anyway and finding things was a bit of a problem. And anyway, I couldn't find this, but I thought "well it doesn't matter because it's absolutely easy". What you did was when the bread, when you made dough for making bread, er, when it had risen, you took a strip of it and cut slices off. You then fried it, or were supposed to fry it and serve it with hot syrup. Only I remembered this recipe slightly wrongly and I thought you fried it in hot syrup and I put this pan of syrup on the stove and I don't know if you've ever tried it. The whole hut was full of black, black smoke was billowing out the windows and I put this dough into, into the. The lads all sent a telegram to Patsy in the "Daily Mirror" saying "Have just tried fried dough, presume Patsy is now widowed".

The worst cook really, he's dead now so he can't contradict me. But John Green was undoubtedly the worst cook. John, John was a dreadful cook and.

Joanna Rae : Well, none of you had had any training, I suppose? No.

Peter Starling : No, no. Well, I, we were fortunate of course that Murdo Tate, you see, in the first, Murdo having been an ex-lighthouse keeper, Murdo was a bloody good cook and I learned my cooking and in particular my baking and stuff from Murdo and to this day I can bake bread fine. The only thing I don't use is scales, I use Murdo's measurements which are BGH's, which is a bloody great handful and a wee smidgeon, which is just a little bit. And you put six or seven BGH's of flour with a wee smigeon. Ah, but, John's cooking was terrible and believe it or not, for five people for a year, we had a ton and a half of herrings in tomato soup. I don't know, herrings in tomato sauce. Anyone who served in the Navy during the war will remember that the Navy floated in herrings, and everybody, universally, hated them and we had, we had a ton and a half of these things. And one day at lunch time, we came in and John was the cook and, put on the table was herrings in tomato sauce. So we all said, "Well thanks, John, no thanks. We'll have a plate of bread and cheese." The herrings and tomato sauce was duly taken away. That night we came in for an evening meal, tea, and out of the oven came a thing in batter. "Oh, good," you see, you can dig into this, it was bloody herrings in tomato sauce in batter. So that was known as "Herrings in in". And we still didn't eat it. No, no, no.

And the following day we came in and out of the oven came a pie, with a crust on, and - oh great, you know. And it was bloody herrings in tomato sauce in batter in a pie. Er, and.

Norman also, Norman had his shortcomings as a cook. He, he, he was a chainsmoker, which probably accounted for the fact that he's been dead for twenty-five years or something. And he, he, had a gap in the two front teeth, just here, and he could actually put a cigarette between this gap and he would hold a conversation without holding a cigarette in his hand, he'd just talk to you, with the cigarette dangling from his top lip. And he'd cook as well, and bake bread and stuff. [text undistinguishable] than seen a bloke baking bread. In fact, in an attempt to, to break him of this habit we actually made him a loaf one day of cigarette ends. It didn't do any good. Norman still used to bake with, with that.

So, altogether we had a marvellous second year. We thoroughly enjoyed it and I think, it's terribly sad to reflect now that all these folks, John Green is dead, Jock Walker's dead, Norman's dead, Joe is a cripple in a wheelchair and I'm the only one that still about on my feet. But, em, to the death, I think they, they remained, probably, my best friends. They were a great lot.

Anyway, the year ended. We were all due, no, Joe would stay on because he'd only been one year. The rest of us were due for relief, er, but the wireless operator who was due to come to F got some disease which I think is best perhaps not mentioned, in Montevideo, and duly didn't appear. I offered to, to stay on for a further year, but this offer was declined, I think quite sensibly, probably, you know.

Joanna Rae : It was quite an intensive period for a third year.

Peter Starling : But it was. But they did say would I stay on until the third trip of the Biscoe, while the new operator was somehow got out. I did, the others departed and the relief party, as far as I can remember, was a fellow called Norman Petts. In those days. They'd now decided that it wasn't any good having a combined wireless operator/diesel mechanic, we

would have separate trades. Norman was a diesel mechanic. A wild fellow called Alan McArthur from the Outer Hebrides, who is now a minister of the Church of Scotland. Alan came as a meteorologist. Jock Walker, Jock Tate appeared back, having had a year in England, during which I think he'd had a three hours course in meteorology and overnight become a meteorologist. And a little, rather strange little chap called I think Norman Hiya, but I may be wrong in that. Dr Fuchs's book should give the name. But, but they appeared.

The, the only. The most interesting part of that was. Of course, one of the very intense activities in the summer period was sealing, because you needed to get enough seals to, to, to feed the dogs throughout the winter and there was always rumours and talk of a disease. I don't know, I still don't know to this day whether there's any truth in it, or. But people used to keep talking about "spec finger". It was reputed to be a disease that Norwegians sealers had had and that it was fatal and that there were no known cures for it and so on and you could get it from seals' intestines and, you were supposed to wear rubber gloves when gutting seals and so on. Needless to say, none of us ever did. Em, but Jock Tate, em, developed a nasty swelling under his armpit here, and he might have had specfinger, we, we didn't know.

Joanna Rae : Does it look like speckles on the finger, is that why it's called that?

Peter Starling : No, the fingers swolle and, and was swollen and inflamed and under his armit here, sort of glands come up. And he, he felt in himself very unwell. Uh, that same year Hope Bay opened, or re-opened and Hope Bay had a doctor and, again, I was getting medical advice from the doctor at Hope Bay for the. The interesting part of that, it's a bit rude. Er, we were supposed to inject him in his bottom with something about the medical test. And he said, "I want to check that you're doing it right, could you take photographs of this". So, each night we had a ritual of photographing Ted's bottom. He had the most photographed bottom in FIDS. And, er, it got a bit better, but he wasn't entirely well when the ship came to bring in a new operator and relieve me and they suggested that Tate would be as well to come back to at least to HopeBay with us. I suspect that was what Tate had always wanted to be, because Hope Bay was re-opening as a major sledging base and he was an inveterate sledger, probably sledged more miles than anybody else in FIDS. And he left with me and he got off, the doctor had a look at him at Hope Bay and decided he was alright to remain there, at least while there was medical attention. And we duly arrived back in the Falklands.

Joanna Rae : Had you ever had to do anything to the generators? Did that concern you quite a bit or not?

Peter Starling : Yes, in fact the generators that were there. Because the generators didn't appear, because of this strike at Coventry Climax, we got generators from the old army camp in, in Stanley. There had been troops in Stanley during the war and the Army camp existed still outside the town and we went along there and the Army had had these generators, I suppose they knew they were leaving, they'd also been away for three or four years and they were in a very bad state, and I, the first year, completely dismantled them and rebuilt them really. They were in, they were in a very bad state. And then the second year, the new generators which we should have had originally came down. Yes, the first year certainly, I spent a lot of time working on, on on the generators – which I enjoyed.

Joanna Rae: But this was without any training in the generators?

Peter Starling : not in a particular one, but I mean I had served an apprenticeship as a diesel worker and I was also a very keen competition motor cyclist and, you know, they didn't present too many difficulties.

So then we were back, back in the Falklands.

Joanna Rae : You were telling me yesterday about some of the fun and games that went on during the Races week or something.

Peter Starling : Oh, well, the Falklands were altogether to me were, were, were marvellous. It was a wonderful place, it still is I think. Um, there were two big events of the year. One was Race Week, the week between Christmas and New Year and all the shepherds come in from what in the Falklands is called the Camp, anywhere else like Stanley is the camp. I believe it comes from the Spanish work Campo meaning countryside. Anyway, it's the Camp. Anyway, everybody who could possibly move comes into Stanley during that week and the, of course the shepherds all ride horses as part of their normal everyday life. And there's races and there's dances each night and, they call it a Race meeting but there's other competitions like wheelbarrow races and all sorts of things. Race Week is a great time in the Falklands. And the other time is, is the May Ball in May. And of course, May is the winter there. And again, the May Ball, it could have, it came very close to being the end of me I think. With a fellow called John Cheal, who went down to FIDS with me but went to another base, I can't remember which base it was. John was a surveyor and we were asked if we would go out and survey the site for the new school which was to be built. At that time, education for camp children was done by travelling teachers. A teacher would travel round on horseback and stay at the sheep station for a week, or possibly give lessons to the children, leave them with homework, ride on to the next sheep station and come back after some time. And they decided, the government, the Falkland Islands Government decided that a school for camp children would be built about half-way between Goose Green and Fitzroy and, of course, in that narrow neck of land across which Two Para subsequently made their famous attack, um, a place call Fish Creek. And John, well John Cheal was asked if he would survey it and I, he and I were friendly and I volunteered to go with him and hold the poles and generally help.

So we actually walked out to, walked out to Goose Green. I think it took us a couple of days. The first day we walked to Fitzroy and stayed overnight with the Manager at Fitzroy, then walked out to Goose Green, stayed in Goose Green, for about ten days surveying this. And I had a girlfriend in Stanley called Rene and I had promised Rene that I would be back to take her to the May Ball and you need to have lived in Stanley to know the importance of this. I mean every girl in the islands has to have a new dress for the May Ball and so on. Rene had got her new dress for the May Ball and the morning we were due to leave to come back it had snowed heavily overnight and everybody at Goose Green who, well, very few people were left in Goose Green. 90% of the people had left to go into Stanley for the May Ball, the remaining one or two said "Oh, of course you can't go now in this snow". And we said, "A bit of snow like this, I mean, not as if it's like a couple of years in Antarctica. This is nothing to us". And we set off. We got ourselves very thoroughly lost, had a rather bad time, spent the night, um, in a sheep shelter place and the following day the alarm had been raised, somebody had run in from Goose Green to say we'd left and of course we'd never appeared anywhere else. And the shepherd from Swan Inlet found us. He came out on his horse and found us. And we were taken to the shepherd's house in, in Swan Inlet. So I never did get to the May Ball.

And. Anyway, we eventually got back to Stanley. And then we still, it still wasn't time to leave and I decided that as, in order to, to see a little bit more of the islands, I would, the Falkland Island Company had a steamer called "The Fitzroy", which used to link Stanley with Montevideo, and also then run around the islands, dropping stores off at the various sheep stations. I would take a passage round the island on the Fitzroy and I got out to San Carlos on the Fitzroy and got a telegram from no lesser person than His Excellency the Governor, asking me to come back to Stanley. And there was a small ship run by the Falkland Islands Government, called "The Philomel". She was actually a motor fishing boat. Em, and they ran her as a general communications vessel around the Falklands. She had also a sick bay built on deck, so that if anybody fell sick out in the islands they could bring him or her into hospital in Stanley.

And they'd run her aground and she'd damaged the stern tube, which is the bit by the propeller shaft passes through the stern. And she was leaking very badly and she needed dry docking and there was no dry dock in Stanley. So she was to go to Punta Arenas in Chile to be dry-docked. And the crew had refused to take her. They said she was dangerous, they wouldn't take her.

So Fids again were called in - a chap called John Huckle, he was the skipper, I was the engineer, and two ex- whalers, Peter Fain and Chris Bundis were the, were the two deck hands appointed to this thing, to take it across to Punta Arenas, which we did. There was in fact no danger in it at all. There was a naval vessel, I think it was the Burghead Bay in Stanley, and she escorted us across to Punta Arenas.

And we duly came back. And the crew returned too, but not the engineer, because he in the meantime had unfortunately taken sick and in fact he subsequently died. So I was asked if I would remain on as the engineer on the Phil, which I did for about. I was delighted to do it. I mean I was very happy in, in the Falklands, I was having the time of my life. And, as I say, I was also a keen hillwalker and running round the Falklands on this little, little ship was ideal for me. As soon as we tied up I was off. I think I knew every track on the islands. And I had a very nice girlfriend in Stanley and the booze was cheap. For a young fellow of twenty-four, what more could you want? And I stayed for about, I think about eight months, which had another incidental advantage that instead of coming home in a hard case with the Biscoe, I again travelled home a first class passenger on a Royal Mail.

Joanna Rae : What a couple of years then. That was quite an amazing experience.

Peter Starling : Well, there was more. Yes, I was three years away altogether. A couple of years in Antarctica and probably three months getting there and back and nine months running around on the Phil.

Joanna Rae : What did you do when you got back to this country? It must have been a bit of a let down, really.

Peter Starling : Yes, um. I still had ideas that I would follow a career at sea, what I wanted to do. I, but I was also very keen to go back to FIDS. However, I met the girl who subsequently became my wife and this put a stop to both these thoughts. I was offered a job by my old marine radio company, the company I'd worked for as a Ship's Radio Officer, on the shore staff, doing servicing and installation of new radio equipment on ships, which was a

very interesting and a very nice job, a very interesting job. It involved a lot of travel. It's difficult to believe now when, but in those days Britain certainly still led the world in marine radio and I was fitting new ships, building in Holland and France and even in Japan. So it was an interesting job.

But I was beginning to realise that to get on in this world, you unfortunately need letters after your name, rightly or wrongly. I think I was a reasonably good technician, but that was it. To get any further I needed a more stable base, to go to night school and study and things. So I left that company and joined Ferranti in Edinburgh, which enabled me to attend Herriot Watt. It's now a university, at that time it was the tech. That led me to a Higher National and eventually Chartered Engineer.

I then joined the Civil Service as a Scientific Officer. I'm not very proud of having been in the Civil Service. I'm glad to say I wasn't actually in it very much. I was in it and I did well in it, I became a Senior Principal Scientific Officer. But most of the time I was in it, I was actually seconded from it to European Space research. I spent seven years with ESRO, the European Space Research Organisation. Two years in Holland in a space technology centre in Holland and five years back in the Arctic - we built a range just outside Kiruno in Swedish Lapland and I was five years. I think I was very fortunate. I'd got involved in, um, instrumentation for rocketry and missiles with the Civil Service and with Ferranti. So that when they wanted someone for this range which was rocketry and, and engineering in, in cold climates in the Arctic, I was, you know. So I had five years in, um, Kiruno with ESRO, came back to the Civil Service, was a Project Manager for the British Underwater Test Centre at, at Kyle of Lochalsh. And, um, we had at Kyle a lot of the equipment we used was made by RCA - Radio Corporation of America - who had a British subsidiary, RCA of Great Britain. And they offered me a directorship, um, an offer I couldn't turn down. Very shortly after RCA permitted the British subsidiaries to be bought out, a management buyout and it became an all British company called CIRCO, where I remained as a Director until I retired and, three months ago.

That's it really. I'm sure afterwards I'll think of all kinds of funny stories.

Joanna Rae : I've enjoyed it very much. It's been very interesting. It's been really nice to talk to you.

Peter Starling : Thank you. Well, I've enjoyed it. I don't know all that many people that are interested. And I've enjoyed talking about it. As I say, I'm still in touch with, sadly so many of them have passed on, I think. I was. Eric Salmon and I, I think, were perhaps the youngest of the FIDS of our year by a couple of years or so. And also, I think smoking possibly had, I mean in those days nobody ever suggested that it was, smoking was bad for you, wouldn't do you any good or. Virtually everybody smoked. I never did. I, not for any. I mean I'd got all the other vices, but I just didn't like the taste of cigarettes. I never have been a smoker. But when I think, you know, that John Green has gone and Norman's gone and Joe Lewis it was, very, very sad. He was very interested in the Scouts and he, I believe, was out canoeing with a party of Scouts and was caught in a thunderstorm and a tree was hit by lightning and actually fell across him and he's been paralysed from the waist down ever since.

Joanna Rae : That's sad, after such an active life.

Peter Starling : Yes, um, Oh, Joe had a very active life, because he certainly went back to FIDS again. He had more than one, one spell in FIDS and then he went back again to the Falklands and was the senior Met Officer in Stanley for a number of years. And, and as I say, tonight I'm going on to see Murdo Tate, who is gladly still about. And Tommy Burgess in California, I'm on and off in touch with. And Joe I'm still in touch with. But that's it.

Joanna Rae : Well, thank you very much for talking to me.