

## WILLIAM (BILL) MEEHAN

Edited transcript of interview with Bill Meehan conducted by Chris Eldon Lee at the BAS Club reunion in Cardiff on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2010. Transcribed by John Arthur Edwards, 30<sup>th</sup> Oct 2018 [with elaborations which were made to the transcript summary by the interviewee added in red where these give extra detail or clarification]

### DISC 1

Track 1 [0:00:00] Chris Eldon Lee: This is Bill Meehan recorded at the BAS Club reunion in Cardiff by Chris Eldon Lee on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2010. Bill Meehan Part 1

Track 1 [0:00:11] Bill Meehan: My name is Meehan. Bill or William. I was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland from an Irish family in 1927 and it was 91 Great Victoria Street, right in the heart of the city.

Track 1 [0:00:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *What were your parents Bill?*

Track 1 [0:00:34] Bill Meehan: My father was the art editor of the, I never remember, I think it was the Belfast Telegraph it was called; it was the sort of the Times of Northern Ireland at the time.

Track 1 [0:00:50] Chris Eldon Lee: *And your mother?*

Track 1 [0:00:52] Bill Meehan: My mother didn't have an occupation really except bringing up me, but later she did various things. In wartime, she worked for a time in a drawing office as a tracer. I said 'How do you learn about tracing?' and she said 'Oh, it's not all that difficult, you're just tracing aren't you?' And she did jobs like that and when I was still young, when the war started, she looked after two little girls and me in a country cottage which she'd got in Northamptonshire while I was at school. So we spent the early part of the war in Northamptonshire and you could say I grew up there and left from there to go into the Army. Oh, I was in 'The London School'. There was a bit of a scandal over something in the family that I never understood because I was too young and I don't really know why my mother and father parted but they did in the early '30's. I guess around 1930, 1931 when I was around 3 or 4 years old and he went to America and I never saw him again and my mother and I went to England and we lived in London from about 1935 to 1939. Then I went to school - a secondary school, a grammar school – in those days you had this 'Eleven Plus' exam and the school was evacuated to Northamptonshire during the war.

Track 1 [0:02:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was your first awareness of the Antarctic would you say?*

Track 1 [0:02:59] Bill Meehan: Oh well I was interested in it and I'd read the books, you know the Shackleton story and the Scott story and all that sort of stuff, as a boy. I was, you might say, an avid reader of travel and adventure and so that was my first awareness of it. I never had any great ambitions to actually go there. In a way I thought it was far beyond what I was likely to be able to achieve you see to get myself on one of these, but, of course, if you read the books you realise that apart from the navy personnel, the other ranks as they called them who did the chores, you had to be very well-qualified or very well known to get on one of those expeditions. Because those were the sort of expeditions I was aware of and I thought I'll never be able to get myself onto anything like that. So it was quite a shock and a surprise just at the time I was looking for a job, thinking I've got to leave the Army in another few months, and I saw this advertisement for wireless operators with FIDS. And it just happened, the one thing I knew about in the whole of life was wireless operating because I'd just done it for 7 years.

Track 2 [0:04:46] But the Korean War broke out and my demob., we all, everyone who'd been in the Army, the national servicemen as well, got another year added to their service, so I actually did 8 years instead the 7 I'd bargained for. So I couldn't apply in 1950 because I wasn't going to get demobbed until January '51. But I applied again the following year and was interviewed by Frank Elliott and.... here we are.

Track 2 [0:05:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *Would you say the interview was rigorous?*

Track 2 [0:05:40] Bill Meehan: Well, err, no, no. But there were a lot of searching questions. I mean Frank was a ....., I took a great liking to him the first time I met him. He was a mountaineer and a rock climber and I had rock-climbing aspirations although I hadn't really done much, you know, because, surprisingly enough, you don't get a lot of time off as a soldier and what you do tends to be channelled, although I did lots of outdoor stuff with soldiers, the actual opportunities for learning the new skills in rock climbing so it didn't happen very much. Anyway, I think I took to him at the interview and perhaps he had some sympathy for this poor boy [chuckles] who had aspirations to join, I don't know. On the other hand they may just have been hard up for wireless operators, who knows?

Track 2 [0:06:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you get any sense of being sussed out psychologically? Were they assessing you?*

Track 2 [0:07:01] Bill Meehan: Not at all, not at all, but I would have said to myself of course I don't need it, I'm sound. I was very confident that I could take anything FIDS threw at me.

Track 2 [0:07:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *You'd lost the sight of one eye by that time in your life. Did that impinge on FIDS approach to you?*

Track 2 [0:07:27] Bill Meehan: Not once we'd cleared the air. I wrote, when I told them, 'By the way I've lost an eye but I wouldn't want you to worry about it because it's not stopped me doing anything so far that I've been able to discover.' Now that's not absolutely true, because there's certain things if you're one-eyed you have to be very careful about, because you don't know what's going on here, you see, when you're looking that way. So I didn't go into great detail but I found it was no obstacle in the army except from being commissioned. That was an absolute barrier that you couldn't get through, even Indian Army.

Track 2 [0:08:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *And just to wrap that up, was there one moment in your time in your Antarctic service in FIDS that you noticed that you were handicapped by only having sight in one eye?*

Track 2 [0:08:28] Bill Meehan: I actually didn't notice it but there was an occasion once. We were almost on our way home, we were on our last, we were going back to Admiralty Bay where I'd been for some time, and I'd been advocating a new hut, or repairs because the hut was falling to bits. And at Admiralty Bay we reported on this when I was there and Frank's report back says 'We'll have to get some timber and do some patching up because we can't have another hut this coming year etc. etc. We've already got one to do next year so we can't put a new hut there', so on the final visit to Admiralty Bay Ralph Lenton, who was a great man for timber work and hut work and so on and a fellow wireless operator, he and I were good friends, we went ashore from the *Biscoe* with the timber and spent, on and off, a couple of days patching up the roof and it was blowing a gale on the second day and getting very cold and a lot of ice and snow, a lot of ice in the air as it were, and I got frozen up [**chuckles**] around here and I hadn't noticed you see. We were back on the ship and Ralph said 'You know we really ought to do something about your eye; it's all frozen up.' And that hadn't happened to me before but it's just that we were exposed and out on the roof. I don't think I had my anorak really up and over, you know, so I decided if I'm ever do this again it'd be best to wear a padded eye-patch or something

Track 3 [0:10:22] Chris Eldon Lee: *Let's go through your service with FIDS if I may now. Rather unusually, as I guess you were an ordinary Fid at the time, you were flown out to the Antarctic rather than having to sail?*

Track 3 [0:10:35] Bill Meehan: Well that was all to do with the military thing you see. I did my extra year which wasn't up until January, but Frank said 'Don't worry I'll get you out by October.' They pulled strings. Well I don't know what strings they tried to pull but, I make one little mention of it I think in my notes I gave you, that I escaped in the end - won my battle with the Adjutant. We had this Adjutant you see who was a sort of elderly Army captain and he wasn't really a signals man but that doesn't matter, he was a cavalry man you see and his words to me were 'If you think they're going to get you out early, you've got another think coming,' you see. And they didn't; it didn't work, but what it enabled me to do I was told well as you know you are leaving after, it'll be 8 years service by Christmas, you're entitled to a 3 month demobilization course. What do they call it? Re-settlement or something like that. So what I did was a refresher wireless course so, although I was still stationed in the barracks at Woolwich and living in the sergeant's mess and being paid my Army pay and everything, each day I went to this place somewhere up near The Oval and practised getting my Morse up to date, because Morse wasn't in use in the unit I was in. We were a big transmitter station covering the capitals of the world, the main Army bases, you know Singapore, not Cairo but the Canal Zone, Australia, Canada, United States all that sort of stuff – we had no Morse links left whatsoever; it was old hat. So I did a refresher and fortunately they had a full set of Marconi's ship radio, these transmitters that were in current use by the Merchant Navy, the best ones, and when I got to the *Biscoe* that's what they had. So that's why I got my job as radio-man on the *Biscoe* for the voyage home.

Track 3 [0:13:27] Chris Eldon Lee: *So the Army were training you to do something which they were not going to benefit from?*

Track 3 [0:13:30] Bill Meehan: Absolutely, but of course they'd give you training in anything. The favourite one, the old sergeant majors took, was painting and decorating because you went to one of these painter and decorating little companies which are one man and his mates, a sort of one man band, and they weren't supposed to pay you, you see, they were supposed to teach you, but they'd say 'Get cracking with that wall' and they would give you a bonus and a bit of pay and so on, because they were getting your free labour and if you worked hard instead of insisting you got taught things. But anyway, that's by the by.

Track 3 [0:14:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you were flown into Montevideo? And then by boat further south.*

Track 3 [0:14:18] Bill Meehan: Yes, that was quite exciting because I'd never been on a passenger plane. I'd only ever flown as a cadet, an A.T.C. cadet, at school in the old planes at the RAF training stations, Avro Ansons and things like that and in an Army Auster, one of these little spotter planes.

And that's the sort of thing I'd flown in and suddenly I'm on this airliner: BOAC, 40-seater, 40, imagine, passengers! And only one class, first class for everybody, and all these rich Spaniards who'd been shopping in Madrid, the wives on board, and steak! [laughs] Oh, dear!

Track 4 [0:15:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *You arrived at Stanley. Give me a little thumbnail sketch of what Stanley was like in 1951.*

Track 4 [0:15:18] Bill Meehan: It was like any of the little Irish or Scottish ports on the west coast or any of the Northern Irish little fishing-village type things, that's how it appeared to me, equally barren.[chuckles] Yes.

Track 4 [0:15:49] Chris Eldon Lee: *When you got there they had some news for you, didn't they, about your rank?*

Track 4 [0:15:54] Bill Meehan: Yes, yes, I was quite surprised by that but I guess the Army will have given me a very good testimonial because I had led a troop for, oh golly, I don't know, for 5 years or something like that, in different places so I think I was OK. I always thought I had a light touch with any sort of leadership role which I know [is good?], because I appreciated people with a light touch when I was a very young soldier, but I was surprised.

Track 4 [0:16:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *You were surprised to become Base Leader?*

Track 4 [0:16:52] Bill Meehan: Yes, yes, and gratified.

Track 4 [0:16:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *At that point did they tell you where you were going?*

Track 4 [0:16:56] Bill Meehan: Yes, yes. 'We've got you earmarked for Admiralty Bay'. Let's suppose that the opportunity had been 'you can go to Admiralty Bay as Base Leader and wireless operator or you can just do your wireless operator thing and go to Hope Bay', I'd have chosen the latter, not because I didn't want to be a Base Leader but once we saw the set-up what Hope Bay were going to have. And you saw my friend Brian Hunt the other day, I would rather have gone there, but there you are, that was not to be

Track 4 [0:17:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *So tell me what your duties were as a Base Leader in the early '50's.*

Track 4 [0:17:44] Bill Meehan: Everything, almost everything. Well there were certain things we settled. I left the running....we shared out the jobs. Somebody looked after the dogs and made sure they were fed. That didn't mean I did no dog feeding because we were all expected to help, you have to hunt seals, you have to kill seals and gut them and store them and that sort of stuff. And when I first went to Admiralty Bay we had 17 dogs, there was a lot of work to be done because most of those dogs were going off on the next call of the ship, they were going to Hope Bay. And they were the team that became known as 'The Admirals' at Hope Bay because they'd come from Admiralty Bay, you see.

Track 4 [0:18:41] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you take to dogs?*

Track 4 [0:18:44] Bill Meehan: Oh, yes, yes. I loved it.

Track 4 [0:18:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *Why?*

Track 4 [0:18:50] Bill Meehan: Well, although I was born in a town and have lived in towns I'm really a country boy and I like dogs and I like horses and I'd been brought up as a very small child with both and, yes I took to them. I mean they were brutes, you see [chuckles].

Track 4 [0:19:15] Chris Eldon Lee: *Had you had any training in handling dogs?*

Track 4 [0:19:18] Bill Meehan: No, none whatsoever. No. But, you know, I suppose there is training that people need in dog handling. Tony Vernum, one of my Admiralty Bay party, he'd already done a year at Signy. I met him in Stanley and he knew about dogs and he was the youngest member of the party, I think he was a very young Fid, I believe he was not quite 18<sup>th</sup> birthday when he arrived, when he first went down, and quite a big, well-made chap and a tower of strength and I designated him the 'dog man', you see.

Track 5 [0:20:14] And he showed me the few essentials, really you've got to jump in the saddle and off you go. That's one way to learn how to ride a horse, isn't it, if someone shows you some of the fundamentals? So Tony showed me how the dogs were put on and the hell of a job you had to keep them [**from**] killing each other while they're [**being harnessed**] once you take them off the span and you try to get a team of them onto the sledge. You can hammer down pickets and things like that to try and keep them from getting to each other but usually it ends up in a big fight and if you interfere you'll get bitten as well, but Tony would lash around with the sledge hammer, you know, mallet, big pick-axe handle, that's the thing, was a great tool for dogs. They respected a bash with a pick-axe handle. But it wasn't very much it wasn't necessary, I mean once they're pulling they go like mad. They loved doing it and everyone's fine; we're all happy and then at the other end they're tired, wherever you've got to, and they just want to be fed and snooze down, you see. So that how it started, so I just picked up dog work and I did lots. I went out on my own. The rule I had was you could take the dogs for a trip on your own but keep on the Keller Peninsula, no sea-ice stuff, but if we made up parties we'd go across round the bay to various other places.

Track 5 [0:22:09] Chris Eldon Lee: *So did sledging at that time at Admiralty Bay have a real purpose?*

[Track 5 [0:22:13] Bill Meehan: No, none whatsoever. Sorry, that's not quite true because we were asked I think to replenish a depot which we did. It was really for lost Fids, as it were, and very useful it was later on for the team who came after me. So we'd do a trip on the sea ice out there because it's very difficult to take everything in a dinghy. I think the winter trips on the sea ice were much safer than the summer trips in the dinghy and looking back on it I'm very surprised the bases were given dinghies because I think some did [**come to grief**]. A couple of people drowned at Admiralty Bay just going between the *Biscoe* and the base some other year later [**Fuchs says 3 years late Ron Napier drowned in this manner while visiting Admiralty Bay from Signy**], but we survived OK. There's a bit of luck in it isn't there, eh? (chuckles)

Track 5 [0:23:26] Chris Eldon Lee: *With your wireless operator hat on, a lot of your time was spent sending met/[erological] observations?*

Track 5 [0:23:34] Bill Meehan: Yes.

Track 5 [0:23:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *Tell me a bit about that, Bill.*

Track 5 [0:23:36] Bill Meehan: Well, in the early days at Admiralty Bay I was always the first chap up in the morning and I would wake up the met. man for the 8 o'clock obs and I had to start the generator and so I had to be one the ball at a quarter to eight, you see, particularly in the cold weather when these generators we had were a bit of a sod to start so you had to apply various techniques to them. So he would be up and doing his ob. while I'm starting the generator and then his ob. would be ready to send at 8 o'clock and then on through the day. I mean it wasn't, it wasn't hard work for any wireless operator to cover the amount we did. Even though, sometime in the year, I don't know when, Deception had been what one calls the control station, that is all the traffic came in from the Bases to Deception and they then transmitted it all to Stanley in one longer transmission. They [**Deception**] were beginning to run out of oil, generator fuel, and so they passed it over to me and I did it for the rest of my time there and even that isn't arduous. You don't spend the whole day hammering away and the whole night, as you do in my early days serving overseas in the Army. Every now and then you'd go off duty and collapse on your bed and sleep and then get up and go back on shift again. It doesn't last forever but you could easily do that for a few weeks on end.

Track 6 [0:25:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *A lot of the traffic for the radio operator, because you became that, was of a more romantic nature?*

Track 6 [0:25:49] Bill Meehan: Yes, yes, of course, as I've already said the wireless operator is a party to all the romances going on and he knows which are the two-timers and the ones with a wife in every port, that sort of thing, yes. But then of course all the other wireless operators, not just the control one that they come through, all of them are listening to it, or can do if they wish. And, yes I handled the love life that was going on.

Track 6 [0:26:33] Chris Eldon Lee: *The private messages, the 100 words per minute. Was it 100 words per week or per month?*

Track 6 [0:26:38] Bill Meehan: I think it was the monthly one, yes, you were allowed it one a month. There we are, yes, yes.

Track 6 [0:26:50] Chris Eldon Lee: *Therefore, you were in a privileged position, weren't you, to be aware of what was going on in people's private lives?*

Track 6 [0:26:57] Bill Meehan: Yes, exactly yes but I suppose you could say you have a duty not to spread it around, you're learning these personal secrets as part of your job. It's rather like the doctor, he doesn't go and tell, or shouldn't do should he, be telling everyone what ailments so-and-so is suffering from.

Track 6 [0:27:28] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was there ever a conflict of interests in that you might be aware of something from one of these personal messages that the Base Leader of another base might need to know?*

Track 6 [0:27:39] Bill Meehan: I can't think of one example of that, no. I mean people didn't send anything like that.

Track 6 [0:27:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *So what sort of traffic was there; what were they saying to each other; typical example?*

Track 6 [0:27:58] Bill Meehan: Typical example? Well I'll give you .... the late John Tait, he'd been a lighthouse keeper and a seaman I think and was a gash hand in FIDS and very expert with dogs. He was at Hope Bay and Jock was conducting a romantic exchange of messages with, I've forgotten her name now, but somewhere up in the far north of Scotland. It was a very Scottish lady's name and Clan name but I've forgotten what it was now, which is just as well, and that went on for some time. Our own base, of course, was very discreet because it was embarrassing for them to write out their thing to their loved one and hand it to me, you see, knowing I've got to read it, haven't I? But in a way the wireless operator can transmit everything but he can't take it all in and after a while it's just routine, isn't it? It doesn't matter what you're sending, it could be in cipher code, you don't have to take it in, you just send it.

Track 6 [0:29:29] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did affairs or relationships tend to survive the Antarctic experience?*

Track 7 [0:29:35] Bill Meehan: Well my own did, and some of them did, from what I've heard around mine wasn't dissimilar. Between thinking about FIDS in 1950 and then in '51 again, I met my present wife. I didn't meet her until the summer of 1951, it was probably August, and I wasn't absolutely sure whether I was going to be able to go or not in August and Frank Elliott was still trying to get the Army to release me, that sort of thing, or at least I think he was, as I say that didn't work. But then suddenly it became clear that Frank was going to put up with me and still take me and I had to get out in January, and it had to be early January so what I had so on my final leave, I don't think my service expired until the 23<sup>rd</sup> January and I must have caught the boat, sorry the plane, very early in the New Year, I think it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> January something like that. So sometime in October I was aware that this was going to happen - I really was going - so I told my, this dear lady that I was going to go off for 18 months-ish and we made all sorts of casual arrangements, you see. I later proposed to her by Morse code, by a message through.....no a letter, I didn't propose by Morse code! What I did was I wrote a letter to her that she would have got round about, I don't know, about the autumn ship that was going to relieve some of the party. The first call of the Biscoe in 1953, no it came before Christmas in '52, late '52, some mail came in on that and I sent mail out on that saying I thought I was going to be home by about June next year so here's my proposal. Then I proposed and I got an air letter back, when I say an air letter would go to Stanley, so many words on it again, I think there was only 25 words, something like that you were allowed, and then Stanley would transmit it to the bases. And she said 'Yes', so we got married in August after I got home.

Track 7 [0:33:19] Chris Eldon Lee: *How frequently could you contact....what was your wife's name?*

Track 7 [0:33:24] Bill Meehan: Roberta or Robbie

Track 7 [0:33:26] Chris Eldon Lee: *How frequently were you and Robbie in contact then when you were down south?*

Track 7 [0:33:30] Bill Meehan: Well we both wrote to each other but, of course, you received these letters in a great heap at some time or other.

Track 7 [0:33:39] Chris Eldon Lee: *Every day? Were you writing every day?*

Track 7 [0:33:42] Bill Meehan: More or less, more or less. She has them all at home, both sets, mine and hers, and our eldest boy read them all when he was about 12. They were up in the loft in a box at the time and he went up there looking for something or other and found them and so he sat down and read them [chuckles]. But there you are; none of it did any harm.

Track 8 [0:34:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *You were talking briefly about dinghies and you were concerned that Bases were allowed to have these, was your concern mainly about the outboard motors, the Seagull?*

Track 8 [0:34:28] Bill Meehan: Well it isn't just that, they are... We didn't use life jackets you know, nobody did! Nobody went in a dinghy with a life jacket in those days. They still weren't using them, well just about becoming useful 20 years after that. I bought a boat when I was older and ran a boat on the Blackwater which is our local big sailing area for more or less the rest of my time, until I was about 70, so in the early days there, so post FIDS, those '50's, '60's I think, certainly up to the end of the fifties, people didn't wear life jackets. Sailing, capsizing in dinghies, things like that. Only at sailing schools perhaps. So it wasn't a surprise that Fids didn't wear life jackets. You may not know it but the life jackets they had on troop ships were made of kapok and quite tiny, not even as big as the Royal Navy or ship's crew, Merchant sailor's life jackets. They were said, on good authority, they'd keep you afloat for 10 minutes (laughs). So you've got 10 minutes to find a piece of wood to hang onto or something that's floating!

Track 8 [0:36:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *You put your dinghy to good use, I gather?*

Track 8 [0:36:22] Bill Meehan: Oh very much so. When I say I'm not sure that Bases should have had dinghies at all, that would have been from a strictly modern point of view, but from the point of view of people at that time dinghies are good fun and they add to the.... they give another activity at the base. A useful activity, I mean we used the dinghy in summer to collect penguin eggs and that is a big source of fresh food that you're looking forward to. It's like the first seal of summer only much nicer than seal. So a dinghy is useful, and for getting out to ships, you have to wait for them to come and get you otherwise.

Track 8 [0:37:17] Chris Eldon Lee: *You used your dinghy when you were building the new hut in '53*

Track 8 [0:37:22] Bill Meehan: Ah, yes, yes, we had to. Frank or somebody, I think it must have been Frank Elliott, sent a signal saying he wanted us.... we were going to be building a new Emergency Hut at Admiralty Bay and the hut would arrive on the first ship, so that I could get it all built by the time I left which would be on the last ship, or the second ship maybe, and he was sending a carpenter and a whole load of stuff. Meanwhile here are the dimensions for the foundations I would need. They would be bringing the cement, this 'cimente fondue' that was rapid hardening in cold weather, but would I go and get some shingle, or a mixture of sand and shingle, that sort of stuff and he said 'But not from the beaches, get it from high up.'

Track 8 [0:38:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *Why was that?*

Track 8 [0:20:32] Bill Meehan: Well, because it was salty. Now in those days the rules for making concrete were, for god's sake, don't use salt water or anything salty in it! You must have fresh water. Well you still must have fresh water but nowadays they don't worry about it being beach shingle. I didn't learn that until many years later.

Track 8 [0:39:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you were transporting this [*shingle*]?*

Track 9 [0:39:05] Bill Meehan: Yes, we had to go, you see Admiralty Bay isn't the sort of island, or King George Island, isn't the sort of island you can just trek off and go and fetch stuff like that, whichever way you turn you've got quite a lot of glaciers and mountain peaks to cross to get there. Then there is no other way so the dingy gets you rapidly across there to another part of the bay that you can't get at otherwise except by setting up a real climbing party, which wasn't always available. So it had to come from a high beach, it's a geological seam or a geological term, it's a seam of stone and sand from a time before the earth has risen up and it's taken what was beach sand, on a beach with waves hitting it, and it's taken it up higher. Volcanic action has pushed it all up, whatever, earthquake, I don't know, I'm not a geologist but that's what it is. Frank knew there was one there.

Track 9 [0:40:39] Chris Eldon Lee: *The point I'm getting at is that you had to transport all this by dinghy?*

Track 9 [0:40:42] Bill Meehan: Yes, well we put it in bags, sandbags, and brought it back a dinghy-load at a time and the more you put in a dinghy the heavier the weight and the more it goes down so you haven't got a lot of.... [*freeboard?*] ....not much both the dinghy sticking out of the water and we worried a little about that but it all went OK.

Track 9 [0:41:09] Chris Eldon Lee: *That would be the foundations for the new Emergency Hut?*

Track 9 [0:41:13] Bill Meehan: Yes.

Track 9 [0:41:15] Chris Eldon Lee: *And what I'd like to look at now is some of the major incidents that you were either involved in or aware of whilst you were South. You were on the fringes, perhaps, of the Hope Bay incident in 1952, January '52? What was your connection with that?*

Track 9 [0:41:37] Bill Meehan: Well I was a passenger on the ship at that time and, but like all FIDS passengers we were also stevedores: 'stevedore / passenger' with the stevedore probably in front of being passenger, so at any base you arrived at you were expected to offload or assist with it or assist in some way, and that's what we were doing. So I was on the fringes of it in that I was down in a scow at the bottom of quite a small ice shelf that couldn't have been more than about man height. In other words if you were standing up in the scow the top of your head would be level with the beach, the ice shelf as it were. I don't think it was beach but I'm not sure now, my memory's a bit dim on it because it was covered in snow and ice anyway. So we were working as a scow crew, 3 of us Admiralty Bay chaps:- myself, Fred Burns & Tony Vernum, and that means we were heaving it up from the scow to the party ashore already who were loading it into sledges and pulling it, man-hauling it up the hill. And that was going on and quite a lot of stores had been landed. A bit of a bottleneck at the bottom of the hill that's where we were getting most of it, because we would do another journey with the scow, a motorboat would tow us back to the ship, load up more, back to the shore and this was going on when, I don't know how long we'd been doing it, we heard the rifle shots. Someone said machine gun fire **In 'Of Ice & Men' page 164 Fuchs says 'automatic weapons'**] but I don't think there were any machine guns used. And then I realised these shots might have been over the heads of the people on the beach but they were just about over our head, but not much over it, and you hear, it's quite unmistakeable the noise a bullet makes when it hits water. A sort of 'Pttt'. So you hear the shot then you hear the 'Ptttss' and the splash, but it makes more of a splashy, splashing sound, very difficult to describe, and we were hearing those around us. I think that was the time when we got out of the scow and climbed up onto the beach. But by then Doc. Marsh was wheeled out in front I think, pushed out in front. 'You're the Boss here, you know, do something about it.' So he went a parlez'd and we were told to get back on board, so we all went back on board and then some negotiations went on but I wasn't party to those so I don't know.

Track 10 [0:45:19] I didn't even know the Governor [**of the Falklands**] was coming, but we went back on board and the Argentinians themselves re-loaded our stores and brought them over to the *Biscoe* and the crew of the *Biscoe* hoisted them up on the crane things, you know, whatever you call it,

Track 10 [0:45:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *Derricks.*

Track 10 [0:45:41] Bill Meehan: Derricks, that's the word, and put them on board.

Track 10 [0:45:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *So it was the Argies who reloaded all the stores back to the ship, not the Fids?*

Track 10 [0:45:52] Bill Meehan: Yes, well David Hunt sees it differently but I said 'I've got photographs of their boats alongside the *Biscoe*. I'd leaned over the rail and taking them of these chaps' and he said 'Yes, that wasn't all of them' so maybe some did move some more. Difficult to know. I'm not saying David's wrong but I just know what I saw.

Track 10 [0:46:18] Chris Eldon Lee: *And then 'the cavalry' turned up?*

Track 10 [0:46:20] Bill Meehan: Yes, I think it took several days, about a week. So we sat tight for a week. Everybody I thought was a bit 'gung-ho' by then and it was known that we were in touch and anyway I was asked by Bill Bonner who I'd met by then and who was the ship's radio officer, the *Biscoe*'s radio officer, and he asked me to come and give him a hand because there was a lot of radio traffic back and forth and there was only the one wireless operator on the crew, one radio officer, and of course he's got to go and eat and have calls of nature occasionally so we shared a shift system for a while and I took messages from Stanley and later, of course, we communicated directly with the Navy but it was a surprise I think to all of us when suddenly this [**H.M.S.] Burghead Bay** appeared in the bay, in Hope Bay, and a bit of a relief, We thought 'That's it, the Navy's here, it's all over, the Argentinians don't want to start a war, do they? Who wants to take on the Royal Navy?' Of course as Brian has told me, I didn't know, a frigate doesn't have much steelwork in it, (laughs) it's built of cardboard or something. Had they known maybe they would have reacted differently but they didn't and all was kindness and love and brotherhood for the rest of the Hope Bay year I think.

Track 10 [0:48:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *It was reported in the newspapers back home?*

Track 10 [0:48:32] Bill Meehan: Yes, oh, yes, I have the very piece from The Times '58 [**indistinct as turns away to try and reach something**] Oh I did get a letter later that said....I was a member of this sergeant's mess at Woolwich and sergeant messes in the Army are a very close crowd of people, you know, and they keep in touch, and they kept in touch with me upon occasion. Here we are [**he reads**] 'Argentines eject a British party: Incident in Antarctica - a landing party from Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey vessel *John Biscoe* was forced by a party of armed Argentines to withdraw

from Hope Bay where they intended to re-establish a British survey base, after machine guns had been fired over their heads etc. etc. etc.' Quite a large column, 'Strong British protest' and a map.

Track 11 [0:49:39] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was there any alarm or amusement back home?*

Track 11 [0:49:45] Bill Meehan: Well amusement in the sergeant's mess. 'Silly old fool, what's he done now?' you see. 'How did he get mixed up in this?' and a little bit of worry at home I suppose amongst the mothers and girlfriends, wives but it was a nine-day wonder, or three-day wonder perhaps.

Track 11 [0:50:23] Chris Eldon Lee: *There was visit by a Chilean gunboat into Admiralty Bay as well?*

Track 11 [0:50:28] Bill Meehan: Yes, yes.

Track 11 [0:50:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *Again as Base Leader you're presumably awaiting orders as to what to do next were you?*

Track 11 [0:50:34] Bill Meehan: Well I just reported it, but we were friends with the Chileans and I saw no reason to; they'd let me know [**they were visiting**] by lamp. Navies communicate by lamp as well as radio, and they called up the base by lamp and I knew they were calling [**visiting**] because I could understand some of their lamp signals but then of course they started sending me a message in Chilean, in Spanish or whatever, and I'd no idea; I just couldn't get it. So they sent a boat ashore anyway and I went down to the beach and said 'Hello' and this Admiral stepped out and his retinue, including a man with an impeccable English accent who was trained by the Royal Navy. He was a cadet at, where is it they have the Royal Navy cadets?

Track 11 [0:51:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *Devonport?*

Track 11 [0:51:43] Bill Meehan: Devonport, Devonport, yes. As a Chilean young trainee officer he'd gone there and he was very pro-Royal Navy so we were all friends. It was just another boat coming in to this little island and saying 'Hello' and giving us a side of beef and we giving them a party ashore and then they went off. Although they left a tug boat behind and the Admiral says 'I've given instructions', or his aid-de-corp, this ex-Devonport man, he said 'the Admiral's given instructions to the tug boat Captain to entertain you to dinner onboard tonight because we can't stay' and off they went. And we rowed out that evening and rowed back, yes.

Track 11 [0:52:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *There was bottle of scotch involved wasn't there?*

Track 11 [0:52:50] Bill Meehan: Yes, yes there was, yes, and I felt a bit ashamed because I'd put my best trousers on which were a pair of serge, navy blue ones that FIDS issued and they had, the expression is 'the arse ripped out.'

Track 11 [0:53:13] Chris Eldon Lee: *So were you sacrificing your last bottle of scotch?*

Track 11 [0:53:16] Bill Meehan: No, I don't think so, I think we'd replenished by then. No we hadn't replenished because they.... Must have done, must have done, I think we'd got quite a lot of stuff left and whoever..... yes, Bill Bonner left me with one of the big Navy jars of Navy rum, a flagon-type bottle as a sort of thank-you present but what he was doing was softening me up for the following year when he wanted me to volunteer to take his place on the voyage home.

Track 11 [0:54:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *Having spent a convivial evening on board this Chilean tugboat how on earth did you get back?*

Track 11 [0:54:08] Bill Meehan: Well we had to row our little boat back, only you didn't rely on the Seagull [**a type of small outboard motor**]! So I think we got back alright.

Track 11 [0:54:22] Chris Eldon Lee: *Sober?*

Track 11 [0:54:23] Bill Meehan: Ah, no, no. We would have been.... I have to confess that we didn't abide by any licensing laws, or really we weren't all that gentleman,.... We didn't have the sort of British gentleman's approach to it at all, yes, yes.

Track 11 [0:54:46] Chris Eldon Lee: *And you rowed back with supplies for the future?*

Track 11 [0:54:48] Bill Meehan: That's it, that's right. They gave us some red wine and a side of beef, something like that.

Track 12 [0:54:57] Chris Eldon Lee: *Let's look now at the incident that is reported in 'Of Ice and Men'* [[pages 180-182](#)]. *This is the first visit of the Biscoe in the '52/53 season and you were given a whole new retinue of men, weren't you, when the relief took place?*

Track 12 [0:55:16] Bill Meehan: Yes all the chaps I'd wintered with went out, leaving me and a complete new party. So we had 'Lofty' [[Ronald Francis](#)] Worswick, who I hadn't met before but knew of through Tony [[Anthony John](#)] Vernum who'd spent a year with him, 'Lofty' Worswick, George Hemmen I hadn't met before, oh golly, Arthur Farrant, have I got it right? Yes, Arthur Farrant. I had bumped into him at Deception but I didn't know him really. He was a diesel mechanic and he was to become Base Leader.

Track 12 [0:56:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *After you?*

Track 12 [0:56:02] Bill Meehan: After me, that was the appointment. And so I was supposed to hand over Base Leader things to him and show the rest of the party around and introduce them to the base and the routine and all that sort of thing, which I did. Oh, Roger Banks was another

Track 12 [0:40:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *And 'Chippy' Raymond?*

Track 12 [0:56:23] Bill Meehan: Chippy' [[John E.](#)] Raymond, the carpenter, that's right. So we got started on the Emergency Hut, that was the first thing we needed to do, but there was still the base routine we had to keep going. And so that was all sorted out and they were a good crew until the incident of the trip to, I think it's Point Thomas, somewhere like that.

Track 12 [0:56:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is a penguin rookery?*

Track 12 [0:56:45] Bill Meehan: Yes, that's right. Now these penguin eggs they weren't ..... the penguin egg season was over I'm pretty sure by then. So they were going just to give them a day out and Arthur had said to me that he was taking this party over, this is Arthur Farrant, the new Base Leader. And he'd already spent a year at Deception so he knew about dinghies, and he knew about this and he knew about that, and he knew more about Seagulls [[outboard motors](#)] than I ever will because I never really mastered the damn things: been the bane of my life. I've had problems with it in other incidents in the UK since then. Well anyway they settled in very well and when it came to this trip off to the penguin rookery I had no reason to fear for their safety or anything like that. Lovely day. Now this is where I differ from 'Papa' Fuchs and I differ from George Hemmen and I'll go to my grave in this: I really don't understand it because I had a good 68 set [[radio](#)], course it's a big set you know, heavy but you can carry it on your back - as a soldier I did many a day. And that and various other bits and pieces - a tent, emergency tent - were in the dinghy in case they got marooned, but they didn't take it [['it'= the tent, or maybe the radio? It's not clear. According to Fuchs' account they 'unwisely had set out without a tent, and although they had taken a radio transmitter it failed to work'](#)], they left it on the beach behind as Lofty and I found when we went down afterwards. There was just 'Lofty' [[Worswick](#)] and I left there.

Track 12 [0:58:56] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you know why they didn't take it?*

Track 12 [0:58:58] Bill Meehan: I don't, I think they probably decided, well you know it's over-reacting.

Track 12 [0:59:04] Chris Eldon Lee: *It's only a 7 miles jolly trip isn't it?*

Track 12 [0:59:06] Bill Meehan: Seven miles, piece of cake. But of course the weather can change in 7 miles particularly if..... I don't know how much of that 7 miles they had to row rather than having the outboard working, I never asked them. We had very little, virtually zero, discussion on this when they got back. They were very subdued, all of them, they all had their own thoughts on the subject and I didn't question them. The thing had happened, the worries were over, they were home, the Navy had rescued them from the far beaches and bought them in.

Track 12 [0:59:51] Chris Eldon Lee: *I'll ask you to take me through it in just a minute. In you notes you slightly criticize yourself for failing to inspect the [indistinct boat's name] before it went, the dinghy before it went?*

Track 12 [1:00:06] Bill Meehan: Yes, that could have made all the difference to them had I been there. Then they'd have had the radio, we'd have been able to communicate because I know that damn thing works you see.

Track 12 [1:00:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *So that's Base Leader's responsibility is it, to check everything?*

Track 12 [1:00:22] Bill Meehan: Well there is no rule book that says you must go and check everything but there was the new Base Leader you see. You feel that....I don't want to interfere with this chap, he's got to find his feet here. He wasn't in charge at Deception last year but he's going to be in charge here. Whether he's suitable or not is nothing to do with me, it's not my business to interfere in that, and he seems a sound enough man and he's not a young chap, I mean Arthur was, I would say, 10 years older than me, late 30's something like that, I don't know. [**long pause**] I really don't know what to say. Just feel that sense of responsibility that had I just done that, just wandered down there before they went and took a look at it, not a formal inspection or anything like that but made sure they'd got the stuff with us and made sure they knew how to use it.

DISC 1 END [1:01:32]

## DISC 2

Track 1 [0:00:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is Bill Meehan recorded at the BAS Club reunion in Cardiff by Chris Eldon Lee on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2010. Bill Meehan Part 2*

Track 1 [0:00:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *Take me through then, if you wouldn't mind Bill, your side of the story of this escapade. What was the first time that you had any concerns?*

Track 1 [0:00:21] Bill Meehan: I would say late in the day when there was no sign of them and I assumed, they went in the morning and I assumed they'd be back in the afternoon. It wasn't as if they were collecting penguin eggs or anything like that, they were going to take photographs, have a look at the rookery, the first big rookery that they'd seen, for some of them anyway, and I'd told them that there was a depot at this place. At the beach below the rookery they'd find a big chest with rocks around it and perhaps on it, and in there they'd find a primus stove and all sorts of goodies: food, fags - they were essentials in those days.

Track 1 [0:01:18] Chris Eldon Lee: *Matches?*

Track 1 [0:00:21] Bill Meehan: And matches, Anyway they did, and very welcome it was too. They spent the first night there and we thought well that's OK.

Track 1 [0:01:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *Why couldn't they get back?*

Track 1 [0:01:35] Bill Meehan: Because a storm blew up, the weather changed totally somewhere in the mid to late afternoon at the time they would have been coming back. A storm blew up and they decided it would be safer for them to stay where they were. And they knew about the depot, they'd found it, all that side of it worked well, so we expected them to be back the following morning but it wasn't very nice weather then, there was still quite a wind blowing. 'Lofty' and I had informed Stanley, of course, as soon as the party was missing but we knew where they were. There was no sign of them having left that beach although we couldn't actually see them. But the following day 'Lofty' and I set up a theodolite so we could look at an upside down picture, as I say it was about 7 miles away. We went a bit further up the hill behind and suddenly there they were, suddenly the dinghy was in view, they'd pushed off from the shore but instead of coming this way they were going out towards what ultimately would be through the mouth of the bay and out into the Bransfield Strait. So we watched and from time to time they disappeared below the waves then up again and we'd be relieved, 'Oh they're still OK'. Then we lost sight of them and we reported this to Stanley: they were on the high sea, it looked as though there might be danger but it was fairly narrow there. I can't tell you how narrow the entrance to Admiralty Bay is. It's narrow as you come through it on a ship, but in a dingy, it could be a mile wide for all I know but there's another beach, if you imagine this bay, they're just over in another corner of it. And the following day we saw a smoke fire there and reported this to Stanley. And 'Lofty' and I had been.... I was quite a tough young man and I was used to travel and I could walk up mountains and things like that. Lofty was a very experienced mountaineer, rock climber and everything and he'd already given me some introduction to rope work in the week he'd been there before this happened and he and I were thinking the only way we're going to find them would be to go over the glaciers and right the way round. They were on that beach and they were putting up smoke signals.

Track 2 [0:04:50] Well we hadn't got all the right gear for one thing. I think 'Lofty' had got one climbing rope. We didn't know the way [**laughs**], we didn't know the best way but, you know, we would have worked it out. So we could have done it. Lofty was pretty certain the best way would be to go clockwise rather than anticlockwise and I'm sure he was right. But we got message from SECFIDS who didn't say, 'The Navy's on the way, don't worry'; he just said, 'Do not take any action to rescue them. Do not leave Base. Stay with the radio and stay put.' and that's what we did. He also told us to paint a sign way up on Flagstaff Hill that said 'Stay'. [**Spells letters**] 'S' 'T' 'A' 'Y'. We got the 'S' the wrong way round, not that it mattered, they didn't see it, at least I don't think

Track 2 [0:06:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *That was a difficult order to .....*

Track 2 [0:06:12] Bill Meehan: Orange paint.

Track 2 [0:06:14] Chris Eldon Lee: *That was a difficult order to obey wasn't it? Sit there and do nothing.*

Track 2 [0:06:20] Bill Meehan: Yes, but those were our orders. We did what we were told and highly relieved we were that we didn't any longer feel obliged to make that journey.

Track 2 [0:06:34] Chris Eldon Lee: *So the Navy arrived did it?*

Track 2 [0:06:36] Bill Meehan: So, then I think I was told in a coded message that the Navy was on the way; they were out there somewhere or other. I think it was the H.M.S. *Veryan Bay*, [Fuchs says HMS *Snipe*] I'm not sure, plus a sloop were out there, but all that we saw was a midshipman with a motorboat who towed their dinghy. I think they were in the motorboat and the dinghy was empty behind it.

Track 2 [0:07:05] Chris Eldon Lee: *Had the dinghy motor failed?*

Track 2 [0:07:07] Bill Meehan: Oh yes, the outboard motor had failed constantly. They [**the men**] were in.... They weren't in a bad state, they looked as though they'd been on a rotten long journey over the hills and far away for a week or so. They were all dirty and sooty, you know from the Primus stove. You can get a bit sooty from a Primus stove.

Track 2 [0:07:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *So how were they returned to you?*

Track 2 [0:07:43] Bill Meehan: Sorry?

Track 2 [0:07:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *How were they returned to you?*

Track 2 [0:07:45] Bill Meehan: Well as I say, I had very little discussion with..

Track 2 [0:07:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did they get back to base?*

Track 2 [0:07:56] Bill Meehan: They were towed in by a Navy midshipman who got sent out in a motorboat by the Navy. 'Go and find these chaps.' and he found them right away, where we said they were, where we'd last seen them. And they were about to make another attempt when the Navy arrived. In a way they were somewhat disappointed! George Hemmen told me later they were a bit disappointed to be rescued by the Navy. It was a bit humiliating in a way because they were quite alright and they would have got back as soon as the wind dropped. Yes, that was the theory; but they were very subdued.

Track 2 [0:08:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did Base practice change after that in any way?*

Track 2 [0:08:49] Bill Meehan: I don't know because I wasn't there much longer, I was due to go to Port Lockroy, but as for base practice changing I think there might have been a lot more emphasis to make sure that parties had radios with them.

Track 2 [0:09:06] Chris Eldon Lee: *Towards the end of your FIDS career you found yourself in the middle of a Royal Event, didn't you, the Spithead Review of 1953? Tell me the story behind that.*

Track 2 [0:09:16] Bill Meehan: Well that was very exciting really. As we were coming up the Atlantic, first of all we had a signal that were to get home in time for the Spithead Review. The *Biscoe* had been ....its name, not its name but its title, changed. It had been formerly the 'Survey Vessel' *John Biscoe* and henceforth was to be known as the 'Royal Research Ship' *John Biscoe*, which sounds very grand, doesn't it? Same boat of course, same 'old tub'! [laughs]

Track 3 [0:10:00] But anyway, we were all invited, the ship's crew and all the Fids on board were invited, to attend. And the idea was all this depended on the ship getting home by some magic date which might have been the 6<sup>th</sup> of June or whatever, I can't remember now. The Spithead Review takes place after the Coronation you see, about a week after, and I can't remember when that was. So there we were, rolling down the Atlantic slowly, doing our 12 knots on the way home and the command was, we were ordered ... we were provided with uniforms. Now the ship's crew, some had

jerseys and some had jackets and we Fids, including me as the radio officer, we got our peaked caps and a sort of like a Petty Officer's uniform I suppose they all were: blue jacket, blue trousers, black tie.

Track 3 [0:11:29:] Chris Eldon Lee: *Black tie?*

Track 3 [0:11:31] Bill Meehan: Yes, we had to buy our own shirts, ah yes, I remember now. We arrived in the docks in Southampton a day, just in the nick of time to enable us to have a long weekend at home. We were all released for a long weekend, to be back here by Sunday night for the Spithead Review on the Monday. Now I may have those days wrong, the wrong days of the week but it was a bit like that.

[Documents online show it was Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June and the 'RRS John Biscoe Royal Research Ship – Survey Vessel' was next-to-last in line G between the minesweeper 'Posamton' (Thailand) and 'D'Iberville' (Canadian Government) ]

A couple of days back home, a couple of days to buy a white shirt for the occasion and a clean handkerchief or two, that sort of stuff, and then back on the *Biscoe* for the thing and I remember calling the *Southampton*, whatever the ship was that was in charge, that we were just casting off and would be coming out to take up station, the *John Biscoe* and getting the acknowledgement of that and then I heard we were being called by a yacht out there somewhere or other as we went out to take up our position in the line. This yacht called me and its name I shall remember to this day: *Serendipity*. I had to look up in the dictionary what serendipity meant and it's a very good word actually and a nice name for a yacht, so that's why I've remembered it. They just called me up to say 'We wanted the privilege of speaking to the famous *John Biscoe*'.

Track 3 [0:13:28] Chris Eldon Lee: *Anybody famous there? Did you meet anybody famous?*

Track 3 [0:13:31] Bill Meehan: Oh yes, yes, we had various people came round, notably, notably Scott – oh golly I've forgotten his Christian name

Track 4 [0:13:46] Chris Eldon Lee: *Peter*

Track 4 [0:13:47] Bill Meehan: Peter Scott, son of the famous Captain Scott, and he made a point of coming on board and stayed with us for some time and chatted to everybody and he was very well-known. And there were other people whose name long escape me, and then of course we had the inspection were Her Majesty comes round, our new Queen crowned a day or two before, but appointed about a year before when her father died. She, dressed in blue, in the royal barge and came down the line of ships. And we were debating before she came about the taking off of the caps and where, how you stand with caps up here, all this was explained to us. We must doff our caps and then 'Hurray, hurray, hurray.' Keep your cap off until she's passed, and whether we should say 'Hurrah' or 'Hurray' [both laugh]. And there was two schools of thought there and the word went round well you can say what you like. If you're a hurrah-chap say 'hurrah' and if you're not say 'hurray'

Track 4 [0:15:08] Chris Eldon Lee: *I should just go through one or two more details before we depart as you've appointments to go to. Health and Safety was primitive in your time period down in the Antarctic.*

Track 4 [0:15:31] Bill Meehan: Yes.

Track 4 [0:15:33] Chris Eldon Lee: *You say here that FIDS might not have existed if Health & Safety had been more stringent. What do you mean by that? 'Some of the things we did,' you say, 'would probably be considered rash today but then we worked on a shoestring and had we not done so it seems as though FIDS might not have existed'*

Track 4 [0:15:44] Bill Meehan: I think that must have been a strong possibility of that. I think the whole organisation was run on a relative shoestring. You think about it, most of the equipment was second-hand, nothing wrong with that, and it worked and we got by with it. I don't think the income to the Falkland Island government, and they were the ones responsible for kitting Fids out and all that sort of stuff, I don't think they could have been all that handsomely reimbursed in those days from the whaling dues, I don't know, I don't know how much they got, I don't know the economics of it but that was my impression. Now I know there was at the time a lot of criticism of Frank Elliott and I've no reason to believe at the time the criticism wasn't correct. At the same time I think he had a very tough job to do in organising this without a lot of staff, very few staff behind him, and he would have been given a budget to work to and told 'when that's all gone there's no more money.' It must have been like that, I can't believe it operated any other way. A lot of Antarctic expeditions in the old-style of course operated on people like Shackleton calling for funds and got grants from the Royal Geographical Society and a lot of money subscribed by rich people and so on. You had to have money to do it and I don't think we had an awful lot because Britain was in a state at the time we're talking about, the

early '50's, much as we are this year. There was no money, it was obvious to me, in everything we did in the army that we were operating on a tight budget.

Track 4 [0:18:10] Chris Eldon Lee: *Do you feel that health and safety was compromised by that lack of resources?*

Track 4 [0:18:15] Bill Meehan: No, it just hadn't been thought about. There wasn't any 'Health and Safety'. I believe 'Health and Safety' was a very good thing when they started imposing it on building work and so on, construction generally, and that's where there were an enormous number of deaths every year in the construction industry - people killed and maimed for life. No safety belts, anything like that. Car accidents, seat belts, that's another one.

Track 4 [0:18:50] Chris Eldon Lee: *Let's finish this on a little story about a radio spoof that you were involved in: the great 'South Sandwich Wireless' spoof.*

Track 4 [0:19:00] Bill Meehan: Yes, I'm quite proud of that. I'm not sure whether I invented it or Geoff Collop, who was a very good friend of mine at the time. I'd met him on the day we joined FIDS, or came for our interviews. We came at the same time and were both interviewed by Frank Elliott in the morning and then you had to go off and do other interviews and we went out at lunchtime together and had a sandwich somewhere or other, and a beer, a wander in the gardens and we decided there must only be one vacancy and so we were rival candidates for it. And Geoff told me about this expedition to the Mountains of the Moon in Africa or somewhere or other. He thought it might be Africa and he and I said if I don't get this one perhaps I can apply for the Mountains of the Moon one, but fortunately they wanted at least 2 wireless operators so we were both taken on. But Geoff went to Port Lockroy so I saw him again later and the spoof was, to get back to the point, that the South Sandwich Islands were part of in those days the Falkland Island Dependencies, and presumably are still part of British Antarctic Territory, were unmanned. There were no people there. I've never been to them so I can't tell you anything about them, but there being nobody there didn't matter to us. We decided we'd have a base on the South Sandwich Islands! Now I'd got a little... this pack set, or one of the base pack sets, that I used for emergencies for when my main transmitter wasn't working for some reason or we couldn't start the diesel engine. I had this little pack set beside my bench, always there as an emergency if the main radio doesn't work. So one day, apropos of nothing at all, except that Geoff Collop / Bill Meehan spoof plan, I called myself up on the, from this station that I said was in the South Sandwich Islands. Or other people said it was. I gave myself ZHF33 or whatever the number, I forgot, whatever, and called me.

Track 4 [0:21:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *By Morse?*

Track 4 [0:21:45] Bill Meehan: By Morse, you see. And I answered it and then, 'I've got one message for you,' and I sent myself one little message about something or other. And I acknowledged it, you see, and this chap Kelly, who'd just arrived in the Argentine Islands, I didn't meet him there and haven't done, never have done, he called me up and said 'Who was that then? Who's ZHF37 or whatever?' And I said 'Well that's the South Sandwich's'. 'Oh!' We said all this in Morse to each other and so it sort of blossomed from that and every time we did an observation all the bases would call me and send in their obs. by Morse and the South Sandwich one would call me. But it was me with my left hand on the other key. Completely different sounding wireless note and I tried to disguise my (sending?)

Track 4 [0:22:54] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you were sending met obs. from the South Sandwich Islands?*

Track 4 [0:22:58] Bill Meehan: Yes, to myself. They never went to Stanley of course.

Track 4 [0:23:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was the weather like in the South Sandwich Islands?*

Track 4 [0:23:03] Bill Meehan: I've no idea (laughs), I've no idea.

Track 4 [0:23:05] Chris Eldon Lee: *And how long did this rouse last?*

Track 4 [0:23:07] Bill Meehan: Oh, some weeks. We got tired of it.

Track 5 [0:23:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *It wasn't rumble then? Was it rumble?*

Track 5 [0:23:14] Bill Meehan: No. I don't know, not in the end, what Kelly thought. I think word got round, 'here's a spoof'. The other bases know of course: they knew there wasn't anybody so they would have told him and I expect Kelly told his mates in Argentine Islands, 'I've got this station in the South Sandwich Islands on the hook-up now.'

Track 5 [0:23:37] Chris Eldon Lee: *It's been a real pleasure Bill, I'm sorry we haven't got more time but you've got a lunch to go to. Thank you very much indeed.*

Track 5 [0:23:44] Bill Meehan: Thank you.

DISC 2 END [0:23:45]

#### **PARTICULARLY INTERESTING PARTS TO ME**

**Disc 1 Dog handling and control Track 2 [0:19:15] up to Track 2 [0:23:20]**

**The job of a base Wireless Operator in the 1950's Track 3 [0:23:35] up to Track 4 [0:33:19]**

**Hope Bay & Argentine Navy Incident Track 9 [0:41:37] up to Track 9 [0:49:45]**

**Boating party stranded at Point Thomas in Admiralty Bay Track 12 [0:54:57] to Track 12 [0:59:51]**

#### **Disc 2**

**'John Biscoe' at the Spithead Review, gaining the 'Royal Research Ship' appellation Track 2 [0:09:06] up to Track 4 [0:15:08]**

**Non-existent South Sandwich Islands base radio Track 4 [0:21: 30] up to Track 4 [0:23:36]**