

JOHN HUCKLE

John Huckle recorded at his home in Monmouth by Felicity Aston on the 25th of October 2010. BAS archives AD6/24/1/90. Transcribed by Allan Wearden on the 14th January 2016.

[0:00:00] Aston: This John Huckle recorded at his home in Monmouth by Felicity Aston on the 25th of October 2010.

Huckle: Well apparently my name is John Huckle and I was born on the 22nd of June 1924, which is a hell of a long time ago!

[0:00:18] Aston: And your place of birth?

Huckle: Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire.

[0:00:25] Aston: So John in your last interview we covered your naval career and your time with FIDS, but I'd like to ask you about the FIDASE expedition, can you explain what the expedition was about?

Huckle: Yes I suspect it was part of our IGY contribution, International Geophysical Year contribution, to do an aerial survey of the Falkland Islands and the Falkland Island Dependencies that was the object of the evolution. The first year, was a bit of a disaster and in fact my involvement later with it during the second year of the expedition, was entirely due to that disaster in the first year! Which was a complete misunderstanding between the expedition leader Peter Mott and the captain of the *Oluf Sven*, which was the base ship of the expedition for carrying a helicopter to land the surveyors to check exact positions to be used as fixes along the coast. Now the misunderstanding was really very understanding! But the funny thing was that until, well the second year, they didn't either of them appreciate what had happened! Peter Mott chartered the *Oluf Sven* for the expedition, he was the expedition leader and director of Hunting's and he chartered this vessel with a very competent and experienced Captain Ryge. Now Ryge was asked 'If we ask you to sail from A to B would you be able to get to B for us?' And he said 'Of course, I'm perfectly competent I'll do that', and you see and when they got to the Antarctic, Peter Mott asked him to sail for somewhere and when they got there of course, it wasn't there (!), because the chart was probably about 10 miles out in this instance, and Ryge said to Mott, 'Well the place you want me to go to isn't there. I'm sure I'm in the right position'. And Mott said, 'Oh, well of course the chart's wrong'! and Ryge got quite indignant about this and said, 'Well the chart's the one you've supplied, I've got you to the position you wanted!' And Mott said, 'Ah, well we are here to correct the charts'! And poor old Ryge hadn't the faintest idea but that is what they were going to do, he thought he had been contracted simply to get them from A to B, and nobody mentioned to him that B might be miles out of position and he'd have to find it when he got there!

[0:03:43] And this caused a complete misunderstanding, and it's brought out in some respects in Peter Mott's book *Wings over Ice*, but I heard it from both sides and the sides

were identical. Ryge didn't understand he'd been chartered by a company to survey the coast and correct the charts, and Mott thought that any captain sailing to the Antarctic with a survey ship would know the charts were inaccurate! And that was it, and it so happened when Mott got back into Port Stanley, after a fairly horrendous first season he said to me, 'I wish you could come down and help us with the ship's crew and captain'. And he had trouble with the rest of the crew as well, who were all Danes, and I said, 'Well I don't think I can, but I've got a long leave due to me', (this was after I'd done about 6 years in the Falklands), 'and I might be able to wangle that I can spend some of my leave at least with you, if that would be any help?' That's roughly how I got started with FIDASE. Now it continued from there when I decided that I'd really just got about as far as I could go in the Falklands! I was then, as I think Eldon Lee got last year, I'd got sort of rather exotic titles, 'Queens Harbour Master', and 'Director of Civil Aviation', it sounds very wonderful but only 2000 people in the Falklands so it wasn't all that that wonderful! But the fact is that by sort of my 5th or 6th year no hope whatever that I'd get any farther promotion because I'd got to the top of the tree! Added to which I'd arranged to train a Falkland Islander to take over the flying duties I was performing, so I wasn't even going to have my flying to do. And when Peter Mott said, 'Would I go south with him for the second year?' I did rather jump at that opportunity. Then I resigned from the Government and I did have their permission to use my leave to go south with FIDASE and that's how I came to be involved!

[0:06:23] It was a little bit complicated in getting on to the *Oluf Sven* as a crew member, because I was on a Falkland Island passport at the time and I had a British Master's Certificate, but it was due to an exemption from my naval service which was rather an odd thing and the *Oluf Sven*, of course, was under the Danish Ministry of Marine. They sort of looked at these papers, when I said 'Can I serve as an officer onboard?', and they didn't quite know what to do about it. They asked me a lot of funny questions about fishing vessels and what I'd do if I saw a fishing vessel, and as that appeared not to be particularly relevant to a voyage in Antarctic waters I probably made a mess of the answer, but anyhow eventually they gave me what's called a 'Mustering Brevet', which was a bit of paper saying I could serve as a Danish merchant marine officer on board the *Oluf Sven*. And the paper was a bit late in arriving, it didn't reach us until we got Montevideo and it came through the Danish Embassy there. Anyhow all's well that ended well, and I went down for the second season with FIDASE on board the *Oluf Sven*. Peter Mott always calls me the ice pilot and the navigator, but actually I was second mate, now you've got that part!

[0:08:11] Aston: So what was your role within the expedition, you were the Ice Pilot but what were your main responsibilities onboard?

Huckle: Well I was sort of responsible for the navigation, but then of course Ryge is ultimately, as all ships masters was, the man in charge of the navigation, but he really did need a bit of help in the understanding the fact that Antarctic charts were inaccurate and I had a lot of luck, in the first two or three weeks that we were down in the Bransfield Strait area, because I did know where some of the areas were. And I was able occasionally to sort of say to him, 'Oh Peter Mott wants us to go to such & such place and you'll probably find that's 5 or 6 miles farther East' or something like that, and fortunately on, I think, all occasions I was

right about it! Now you may think 5 or 6 miles farther East makes no difference, but in fact it did if you were running a ship because poor old *Oluf Sven*, wasn't exactly 'speedy Gonzales' and we were sort of cruising around at 10 knots, so 5 extra miles to go meant half an hour extra. Now when the expedition wanted to use the helicopter we were carrying, it virtually meant the whole crew had to stop work and sort of attend to getting the helicopter up on deck and away, returned, and all the rest of it! In other words the crew's activity were concentrated on that. Occasionally if you were, say, half an hour late in getting to position, the crew missed a meal because the meals coincided with the time they were supposed to be on deck or vice versa. Anyhow it did interfere with the running of the ship if you did have this extra distance to go, so in the end Ryge began to sort of recognize it was quite useful in having someone advising him in this way. And I knew the breakthrough had come, when one day he turned to me and said, 'Ah here comes Peter again, he'll want us to go somewhere which when we get there it won't be there'! And I knew then, once he'd started making a joke of it, he was sort of accepting the fact he'd got somebody to help him along a bit.

[0:11:11] Aston: So what were the living conditions like on the *Oluf Sven*, what kind of ship?

Huckle: Well actually I was perfectly alright as a ship's officer I had my own cabin, but the expedition were a bit cramped, they had a part of the hold which was designated 'the village'. The main hold of course was taken up by the helicopter and a lift, on which the helicopter came up, and the hatches of the hold had been modified so they all rolled back against the mast and propped up against the mast and in that way the helicopter could take off and come back and land, and load down again into its hanger on this lift. It worked quite well excepting of course we had a problem! We had only been operating I suppose a fortnight or 3 weeks, I can't remember to be exact, but we hadn't been operating very long before we were sending a surveyor to the top of Tower Island by helicopter. And as the helicopter came into land, stirred up a great deal of loose powder snow which gave the pilot a 'white out' and he unfortunately missed his landing and the helicopter overturned and was of course smashed up! And this of actually ruined the whole operation. There was a slightly funny side to this one! Later on there was an enquiry into what had caused the crash, and that was held in Port Stanley, by, I think, the Colonial Secretary, and he asked the surveyor on board the helicopter, or who had been on board helicopter, 'What did you think when the helicopter overturned as you landed?' And the surveyor said, 'Well I didn't really know, it was the first time I'd ever flown in a helicopter and I didn't know quite what to expect, but it did seem a bit peculiar when I found myself hanging upside down'!! That's a true story incidentally!

[0:13:56] Aston: So you joined the FIDASE expedition in its second season, so you were joining the crew. Had most of that crew already completed the first season, and what was their take?

Huckle: Well quite a few of the crew had been changed, owing to Mott complaining about the whole conduct of the ship during the first season. I don't entirely agree with Peter Mott, but he did have grounds to complain and he did manage to get them to change a lot of the crew, but he was, Mott was absolutely convinced he should have a different captain! But actually he was wrong and the owner of the *Sven* said, 'Under no circumstances I am I

changing a competent experienced captain, who I've had for some years, just because you want it. If you want to get him changed you'll have to change your ship'! or words to that effect, I think probably more polite, but it was along those lines, and the crew by and large, actually in the second season we had no trouble really with the crew at all they were very good and very competent and they did everything that could be expected of them! But of course the loss of that helicopter gave us one hell of a headache. We had to get another one, which meant going up to, getting it flown out from Britain to Montevideo, then the *Sven* going up to Montevideo again, picking it up and bringing it back to the Antarctic, which was wasting an awful lot of a good summer months. Talking about surveyors, another, (it's a thing I did mention with Eldon Lee), but another extraordinary coincidence occurred. When I got on board the *Oluf Sven* in Harwich the surveyors for FIDASE, Huntings, were on board, Colin Brown, my old sledging companion, he was one of the 2 surveyors they were sending down! I did mention to Eldon Lee, Colin and I kept on meeting up, quite un-expectedly throughout life, this was another un-expected meeting and actually just to finish, round off that story, the 4th un-expected meeting was when I was flying down to oil rigs deep in the Sahara Desert and Colin suddenly turned up to do a detailed survey of Tobruk!

[0:16:46] Aston: So was it a good time on the ship. Was there a good sense of comradeship as well?

Huckle: [Lots of coughing.] Pardon me but I had to do that! OK, ah yes I think you can say that, everything went quite well. We were all upset obviously about the loss of the helicopter, but of course it did set our work back and it did limit how far we could get. But nevertheless we did manage. Incidentally on that helicopter crash we couldn't get in with the *Oluf Sven* obviously right up close to Tower Island, and she was laying about 2 or 3 miles off clear of a chain of rocks. And I took the ship's lifeboat in to land a climbing party who went up to bring the surveyor and the pilot down. They got there that evening but by that time we had a gale blowing and they didn't come down again till the next morning. I went in next day to pick them up, the climbing party was necessary because the top of Tower Island is a rounded hummock, and as you know rounded hummocks of ice on land tend to develop crevasses as the edges fall away, so you did need a climbing party, couldn't just tell the pilot and the surveyor to walk down because they might have ended up in a crevasse! Actually the crevasses weren't as bad as we feared but they were there, that was the first of my boat episodes if you want to call it that, with the *Oluf Sven*.

[0:19:01] We did have another one, which Peter Mott refers to in his book at some length. I think we were near Bluff Island and down the coast at the end of the Bransfield Strait. And when I first went out there in 1946, or '47 actually, Burden, Captain Burden of the *Trepassey* and I had looked for a passage that had been noted and described by a whaler, and been put on the charts and then taken off again because nobody could ever find it again! And I got some proof copies of the air survey, which showed where this passage behind an island might be. And I managed to persuade both Ryge and Mott I'd like to take the boat in and have a look and see if it was there. And I must admit, I'm not surprised that other ships had failed to see it - we really got quite close to the entrance, which was just behind the snout of a small glacier, and even when I'd gone in the boat and gone there with the boat, I couldn't have been

no more than 200 yards away before I could see the entrance! Then we got inside and there was quite a decent passage through and we came out on the other side, and the *Oluf Sven*, which had been waiting and looking for us, didn't see us till we suddenly seemed to shoot out of a rock cliff! And again it was an obscured entrance or exit in this case. The only remarkable thing about the passage from my angle was that there was literally dozens of Sea Leopards there and I'd no idea that Sea Leopards bred in a sort of colony disposition, I always thought they were rather a solitary animal, but there really were a very large number of Sea Leopards and I'd never seen that before and never seen it since in the Antarctic! I've often wondered if they are still there? Probably the entrance would be easier the find now than it was in my day because I'm pretty sure that glacier will have calved back, you'd be to see your way in, the exit the cliff maybe still a bit obscure? Anyhow that was the story which Peter Mott wrote up with some enthusiasm because he said I enjoyed it very much. Actually I did because it was something I hadn't done for years!

[0:22:04] Aston: Could you tell me a bit about the helicopter that you were using, was it reliable and what was that like to fly?

Huckle: Well I wasn't flying you see, I was just, in fact my only time with the helicopter might have been if we'd had to pass through an ice field and having to spot for leads. But in fact we never did meet ice in that sort of quantities so it was never necessary, you could see what you wanted to see from the bridge. It was a Bell helicopter and they are good helicopters, I have flown them myself subsequently and there was nothing wrong with the helicopter at all, it was actually, to be honest, 'pilot error', he shouldn't really have once he'd started stirring the snow up, he shouldn't have continued the landing, he should have taken off and come back to the ship and abandoned it! Because if you get a 'white out' you really lose all the orientation, and this was in the days before we had these sophisticated modern techniques for automatic hovers and things, you couldn't do it. The helicopter was perfectly reliable and the second one performed very well indeed. I don't really think there is anything really I can add to that.

[0:23:40] Aston: You have mentioned Peter Mott's book about the expedition a couple of times, what do make of his account, do you feel it's a fairly accurate description of the expedition?

Huckle: Well I don't know about everybody else, but as far as the description of me, it's grossly exaggerated!! I wasn't anything like as important as he makes out, but there is an interesting almost political, with a small p, observation to make about that He puts in a very nice acknowledgment at the end, of how many miles of soundings I managed to take through the sort of uncharted waters. It wasn't terribly important because the ship had to go through these waters anyhow, and if it's going through these waters you might as well take soundings anyhow! And as I was interested in the survey work, I could manage to plot my soundings to tie in with the new survey and so on. Anyhow, I mean that was just something I did for interest, Peter Mott made it sound like a valuable contribution and it was something anybody might have done! But there was a political side to this. After we had finished the air survey work, we had a very good opportunity to amend the charts as they were to a very

considerable extent, and correcting quite large errors with this air survey. Unfortunately before it could be published the new charts were overtaken by what we'll call satellite pictures from these orbiting satellites, who could then produce an even more accurate chart, so our chart and this actually poor Colin and I suffered this twice in our life! Our first charts for King George IV Sound, were quite a big improvement, we reckoned that we could get within a mile for the coastline. Actually I regret to say we were a bit out on that! There were errors still of 2 ½ miles out on our charts, but anyhow we did improve because Terminal Island up the northern end of Alexandra Land was very nearly 20 miles out when we got there! So we did improve those charts but before the Director of Colonial Survey could publish our results we were being overtaken by the air survey and before the air survey charts could be published they were overtaken by these 'bloody satellites'!!

[0:26:52] Aston: But at the end of your season, I mean did you feel you had managed to complete the work regardless of the accident with the helicopter? I mean was there a sense that you'd been successful?

Huckle: Oh, there was definitely sense we'd been successful in so far as we'd managed to go, but we would have liked to have finished it right down actually to I think about 75 degrees South was probably I think where we'd been aiming to finish it, in other words all of Alexandra Land, in and cutting across the Peninsula there across to Ronne Bay, Ronne Shelf Ice, we wanted to finish off the main Antarctic Peninsula and we didn't. We didn't manage to get past the Northern tip of Adelaide Island with the air survey.

[0:27:54] Aston: And was it hard work, were there any sort of dangerous aspects to what you were doing?

Huckle: You're one to ask that question! Well I don't know you well enough Felicity. You can't answer it, you can't say what you enjoyed doing even though it maybe your work if you really enjoy a thing it isn't work! To say is it hard work, I mean bits of it were difficult to do yes. Now danger, did you mention that?

[0:28:40] Aston: Yes I did, yeah!

Huckle: Well actually Eldon Lee mentioned that, I always remember I think is Fridtjof Nansen's remark, 'A good explorer never has an adventure, because an adventure is an unexpected incident which should be planned against'! In other words you should never have unexpected incidents, so you don't have adventures, but you know one does invariably have adventures despite all the careful planning, it doesn't matter how careful you are you will get them! And after I'd done that interview with Eldon Lee I was thinking about that side, I did mention the time I rather stupidly flew into the, well it was the fumes from a volcano, which was a stupid thing to do! But shows in a way, I certainly hadn't planned that because I didn't expect to see a volcano that day. Now that was one thing, but another thing which was thought about was running into open water when you are sledging over frozen sea ice. I don't mean shelf ice, I mean actual sea ice, frozen sea, probably 3 or 4 metres thick, and twice I encountered that, once with Colin, when we were going up towards Terminal Island at the end of Alexandra Land and I think we got within a mile or two of the open edge before

we actually realised that there was open water beyond that! And any breakup of the ice, we would just drift out on the ice pack, and actually in our case that really would have been a disaster, because we hadn't got any radio and nobody in the base knew where we were or anything. And I had the same thing happen at the Maurice Faure Islands, when Ken Blaiklock and I were going out, with supplies for Bernard Stonehouse on the Dion Islands, we were part of a depot laying trip, while another couple took what we carried on to the Dions. Ken and I remained on the Maurice Faures, for Ken to do a survey because the Faures were completely uncharted! But in the evening we went to bed, turned in. In the tent in the morning when we woke up there was a water sky to the west, and I think I said to Ken, 'I'll just nip up on top of the hill to have a look and see where the waters got to', and it was right up to the islands, so we had to beat a hasty retreat!

[0:32:09] And again there is a danger, and after all FIDS or BAS has lost men in this way, when ice has broken up under a sledge party. Now there is another thing that I'm sure you have encountered this, or if you haven't you're going to meet it with me! We old timers tend to all the time sort of say, 'Oh it was terrible for us, we didn't have the clothing you got and we didn't have air support, and we didn't have radios and we didn't have this and the other'! But a thing which one has always got to remember is, at least I will have to remember, you won't have to, I have to remember if you fall down a bloody crevasse it's just as bad for you as it was for me! And equally if you happen to be on sea ice that breaks up and you drift away out to sea in a blizzard, it's just as bad for the modern explorer as it was for us! There are a lot of other things as well I could say, actually, on this question of falling down a crevasse. When I got thinking about it, I admit I only thought of this because you were coming to interview me, but when I was thinking about it, in some ways we had advantage, I had a dog team! And when we went on to crevassed glaciers, we put them on a fan trace, not the centre trace which is a more easily controlled trace, but we put them on a fan trace, so each dog had its own individual line to the sledge and you drove your dog team happily ahead of you, and if a snow bridge was going to give way, there is very good chance it would give way under one of the dogs! And that was an advantage we had over you people, because you had to fall down the bloody thing yourself!! And actually it was easy enough with the dogs, only one on each line, to haul the dogs up individually or just to haul them up, you know they were heavy but you could haul them out of a crevasse, it's damn sight more difficult to get a man out who has fallen down, even though he is on a rope. However it's just a little thought, that when if you ever meet one of us old timers saying 'Oh it was terribly difficult for us and you had it all easy', you just quote them that, 'You had a dog team to fall down first'!

[0:35:06] Aston: So that's a great story, about the difference between ancient and modern explorers, so have you got any other thoughts?

Huckle: Well there was example actually, and it was the last time I left the Antarctic with an expedition of that sort. And that was as we were leaving Deception and we were in a great hurry to get out, we were coming up towards the Bellows and it's only a fairly narrow entrance, perfectly navigable but is a fairly narrow entrance, and Ryge was using the radar to con the ship out with, and he was giving the steering orders from the radar, (I think Mott

actually mentions this in his book?), I was just leaning against the bridge window watching and Ryge suddenly said, 'Oh the radar has gone un-serviceable! We shall have to turn back and go in to anchor again', and I said 'Don't worry it's perfectly alright I can see where we are going anyhow'! And that was the ancient way of doing it, instead of using this modern radar!

[0:36:20] Aston: So your time at FIDASE came to an end, but then you moved on. Was it after that you started working with helicopters and the whaling, right?

Huckle: Whaling, yeah!

[0:36:34] Aston: I think you've mentioned a little bit about how that came about, you were sent to Cheltenham to learn how to fly helicopters and then you went back South again, so where exactly were you based when you were doing that?

Huckle: Well you weren't based you see, (actually the people listening to this won't be able to hear it), but just behind you there is a picture of where I was based, and there is my helicopter flying over the stern of it! It's a bloody great ship you see, a 14,000ton whaling ship and you spent, you sailed in October from Britain and you did sperm whale fishing for a few weeks and then you went on to whaling and we, then on one season we went round Antarctica! And had anything from between 12 to 16 of those little catchers vessels with you and they would bring their whales into the factory and it would be hauled up the slipway at the stern, and processed on the deck and in other words cut up and to be fair, every portion of the whale that could possibly be used, was used! And my job was to fly the helicopter out, and this really was the most stupid thing I've done in my life, because those old S55 helicopters with the piston engine, this was before they had jet engines, the same aircraft fitted with a jet engine was quite a good aircraft! With the piston engine, you did run quite serious risks and we were going out at a 100 miles from the factory ship sometimes with no catchers anywhere near us at all, and if we'd have ditched Salvesens did provide us with extremely good equipment, we had immersion suits on, we had dinghies strapped to our backsides sitting in the helicopter, so that when we ditched we just climbed out of the window with a dinghy attached to us! Actually Salvesens did everything they could for us, it was still an extremely silly thing to do! And in the time I was with Salvesen, well no in 4 years Salvesens lost 4 out of 8 helicopters fortunately they only lost one crew! Unfortunately you could say, but it was fortunately that none of the other 3 actually, well were injured during the ditching, but?

[0:39:40] Aston: Were you aware that it was a dangerous thing to do at the time, or are you sort of thinking in retrospect, that was quite a dangerous activity, or were you aware whilst you were doing it?

Huckle: Well I think sometimes, I used to think when we got to the end of a search of about a hundred miles, sometime's a 110 miles from the factory ship, and think it's a hell of a long way bloody way back! But I wasn't so conscious as I was later, it was later that I learned how vulnerable helicopters can be to mishaps! And of course nowadays with the modern jet helicopter, ancient & modern again, but with the modern jet helicopter and a lot of instrumentation, a helicopter of that size would be quite safe going out that distance, but

actually, no it's some I'll tell you about later. Anyhow that's the answer to your question and that's what I did going out in the helicopter, looking for whales.

[0:40:58] Aston: So these were huge ships going out looking for these whales, and there was just one helicopter on board was it?

Huckle: We actually had two.

[0:41:05] Aston: Oh, so two how many crew and pilots did you have?

Huckle: Well 3 pilots, and well, 3 crews & 2 pilots for each helicopter, so had 6 pilots altogether and we had a very competent engineering staff, they were very good actually they used to keep us running, we had all the spares you could possibly imagine, as I say Salvesens did do us very well.

[0:41:34] Aston: And how often did you go out, was this?

Huckle: Oh, every day if the weather was good, we had plenty of fuel and plenty of spare parts and everything, and I mean down in Antarctica, as you know, you can have quite a considerable amount of calm weather and there's no point in searching for whales if you can't see sort of 5 or 6 miles at least! I mean, you know, otherwise you wouldn't have enough field of view to make it worth flying the thing.

[0:42:14] Aston: What was it like being up there looking for whales, I mean were they quite hard to find or what was that like?

Huckle: Actually surprisingly you had to be the right height, but if you were at the right height, a little bit the height depended on the line of the actual light, but if you were at the right height you could see the spouts of whales quite distinctly. And then of course you flew over the spouts and identified the whales. The one which was difficult was the sperm whale, which would spout 2 or 3 times and then dive! And it would stay down for 20 minutes, sometimes half an hour before it comes up and breathes again and you had to sort of look around all the time for half an hour waiting for it! And they did tend to be rather singletons, but they liked to catch those because of course the sperm oil was very valuable and you'd call a catcher up, and just occasionally you'd call a catcher up and he'd arrive and actually see the whale when it spouted another time. I think the helicopters did pay for themselves - Salvesens obviously thought so or they wouldn't have persevered with them!

[0:43:46] But I have views about whaling. My whaling ended when the campaign 'Anti Whaling' in Britain gathered momentum and they often, the campaigners, claim that they stopped whaling! Actually whaling didn't stop because of the campaign of 'Anti Whaling', and some of the remarks that were made were ridiculous, one of the ones that stuck in all our gullets was whaling was deliberately cruel, whale catchers, the gunners, played a whale like a fisherman plays a trout or a salmon. Well they didn't, they did nothing of the sort because the gunners and their crews were on a bonus for killing whales and if they killed a whale quickly, they could then get on to hunting another one and kill another one quickly! So the emphasis for the whalers was to kill a whale as quickly and efficiently as possible,

that's one thing. The other thing that came into this was the economics that finished our whaling. It, as you can see from that picture that you've looked at, these expeditions were very costly obviously, I mean a huge ship like that! And all these 12 or 15 catchers and 2 helicopters on each factory it cost them a great deal of money, and if you don't catch enough whales then it's uneconomic to go on whaling and that is what stopped whaling!

[0:45:51] Now you may say 'Well that was a thoroughly good thing!', and indeed it was. However there was a lesson which I think is applicable today. When we were whaling, you were supposed by international agreement to catch whales which were large adult animals not the younger breeding stock, and they had measurements and we had whale inspectors onboard, who inspected every whale we caught to certify that they were over the length required. And if they were under the length required, then the gunner and his crew did not get a bonus for that whale! It was still brought onboard the factory ship, it was still processed and oil produced and everything else, but the gunner and his crew did not get a bonus and those bonuses were quite large added to which, not only did they lose their bonus but they may have given up several hours, in fact maybe half a day or more, chasing that whale and getting very wet in the process and getting it in and all the rest of it, so there was no incentive to get an under length whale. Now the difference is we still made use of every bit of that whale. I'm watching what's happening in the sea fishing around Britain at the moment, where if fishermen exceed their quota they throw perfectly good fish over the side and waste them, in fact the seagulls eat them! Well I mean I find that's ridiculous and surely they could learn from the whalers, bring the fish in, sell them but when they are sold make sure none of the money from the sale goes to the crew that caught the surplus quota!

[0:48:07] Aston: So did you yourself, did you notice the decline in the whales, did they get harder to find?

Huckle: Oh yeah, certainly the last season I did, 1960, they were definitely getting very difficult. In fact a rather remarkable thing, they were getting so difficult I did a search with the helicopter through the Bransfield Strait again looking for them, in the area we'd done the air survey and everything, and I was using a chart which was actually based on the air survey! So in a way I sort of had a hand in producing the chart and had a hand using it afterwards!

[0:48:55] Aston: So was that sort of a dramatic change in the space of 4 years from being easy to find to? [Huckle: Yeah] In your opinion what went wrong with what happened, or was it more and more ships there?

Huckle: The Japanese came in, the Russians came in, I'm not saying they were cheating, they may even have been keeping to the international rules, but there were Norwegian, British, Russians and Japanese, they were the main ones! And there were shore stations in South Africa and places like that there, and of course South Georgia was a whaling station, in fact in 1958 there were 3 whaling stations operating in South Georgia, you know shore bases, and the whales were being brought into them, and it was just a massive slaughter of the whales!! I also blame the scientists who did the annual estimate of what we'll say quotas should be, scientists never liked to be wrong! Don't get the idea I'm anti scientist I'm not, but they

never like to be wrong, never like to admit they might have been mistaken, so the scientists every year use to come up with a figure, of, 'Oh you can take 20,000 fin whale'. I'm just quoting out of my head at the moment, but they'll come up with a figure like 20,000 fin whales, but then they'd go to the International Commission and say 'But of course it may be permissible to take 30,000 fin whale, we don't really know, but 20,000 is our estimate!' Well you can guess what the International Commission, which had representatives of the whaling nations and the whaling companies on it, you can guess what they said! 'Oh, we'll try 30,000'! And every year they always went to the upper limit that the scientists have said! I think that if they had stuck to the actual limit that the scientist said was probably desirable, we might still be whaling ordinarily now.

[0:51:31] Aston: And so seeing that sudden decline, how did you feel being involved, in this, in the whaling?

Huckle: Well I only had 3 years, and when I saw Karl Salvesen and joined the whaling, I only had a 3 year, and I decided not to renew it. That was very largely because, by the time I ended with Salvesens, (now this sounds like a lot of 'bull shit' but you can leave that in), I had a land plane licence, a sea plane licence for operating ordinary aircraft on floats as well as on land and a helicopter licence! And this is 1960 and don't think there were more than a couple of dozen pilots in the world who had all three. And there was one company which particularly wanted pilots with all three, and in consequence of course they were rare on the ground, the company was paying well what was in those days a very substantial salary! So at the end of my Salvesen contract and I had got my helicopter licence and hours in, I decided I wouldn't renew my contract with Salvesens I would go for this other company, who actually I ended my flying career with.

[0:53:21] Aston: I'm just interested at what the sort of the atmosphere was, what the attitude towards the whales was, within the whaling community seeing this decline, and all the whaling ships. Were the people involved in the whaling, sort of sad or concerned or just worried about the economic impact on their own jobs, and livelihood?

Huckle: Well, I think!

[0:53:45] Aston: Or all three?

Huckle: I think it's a mixture of all three, yes because actually you see it was a good livelihood for nearly all whalers, it doesn't matter what your position was, they were all making reasonable, until the decline came then the salary, the money dropped off, because you dropped off on bonuses and things! There were little perks, I'll describe one now, (don't think I can be had up after all these years!) We used to have a long range tank, it was a 40 gallon drum in the cockpit, or no the cabin, not the cockpit, the cabin of those helicopters, and this was to give us the extra range so that we could in fact fly for 5 hours on our searches! And this drum had a drainage cock at the bottom, so that you could check whether it had any fuel in it or not you see. But anyhow we always flew off the whaling factory when they were coming back every year, they were going up to Liverpool to offload their cargo and we use to fly off somewhere around the Scilly Isles, and fly up to Exeter Airport which was

the customs airport. Now we had a part of that fuel tank, the end could be unscrewed and taken off and if you put a little shelf at the bottom, you could leave a few pints of petrol in the tank and then a little sort of shelf and above that, you could put thousands of cigarettes!! Which of course were contraband and you had thousands of cigarettes in it, and then you screwed the end back on again you see, and of course when the customs inspectors came onboard, they didn't know very much about helicopters in those days and they looked at this and they said, 'Oh what's this'? And you said, 'Oh this is the long range tank, I expect there's still some fuel left in it'. And you opened the drain cock, bled out a drop of fuel, 'Oh yes, it's still got fuel in', shut the drain cock hastily and the old customs inspector thinks the tank was full, not of cigarettes! However I don't suppose I shall be charged now, with customs duty!

[0:56:38] Aston: [Laughing!] So are there any other anecdotes from your whaling time that you'd like to share?

Huckle: No I think I've practically run out of ideas. [Much laughter from Aston!]

[0:56:52] Aston: Right!

Huckle: Well I mean, it depends on how far you want to go, I mean I've said that Salvesens were awfully good providing the much wonderful sophisticated equipment for us, it really was it was state of the art for the day I mean, you'd probably think it was pretty primitive! But we thought it was state of the art for the day and we did have these immersion suits, yes there is a little story to tell! It shouldn't be down to me to tell this story, but anyhow never mind we did have a slight problem, we needed a relief tube on it; if you were flying for 5 hours in a cold helicopter you needed, well anyhow you needed some means of relieving the pressure as it were. So they designed on this bloody suit, a tube that fitted on to the front and then you bent it over and bound it up, so that it couldn't let in water swimming around, no water would get in, but if you were in the helicopter seat and dying for a pee, you could undo your tube and use it for that purpose! However, I don't know who designed it, but it was a tube that was approximately 6 inches in length, and it had a bore of well not more than my little finger and it was totally useless!!

[0:56:36] Aston: [Amid much laughter!] Oh, dear! It sounds uncomfortable!

Huckle: Yeah, it was!

Interesting clips:

- [0:11:11] Helicopter crash!
- [0:19:01] Many Sea Leopards in a hidden channel.
- [0:36:34] Going whaling.
- [0:42:14] Identifying different whales by their spouts.
- [0:45:51] The end of whaling.
- [0:51:31] Not renewing contract.
- [0:53:45] A perk of the job?
- [0:56:52] Useless pee tube on immersion suits!