

NOEL DOWNHAM

Edited transcript of Noel Downham interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 29th of October 2010. BAS archives AD6/24/1/97. Transcribed by Allan Wearden on 9th October, 2014.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Noel Downham recorded at the Marguerite Bay reunion at Bowness on Windermere by Chris Eldon Lee on the 29th of October 2010.

Downham: Noel Downham, Liverpool 19th of September 1934.

[0:00:22] Lee: What was your first inkling that somewhere called the Antarctic existed?

Downham: I knew about Antarctica obviously from school days, but that you mean when I first thought of going there?

[0:00:40] Lee: No! When did you first learn about it? [Downham: At school yeah] Lee: Did you have any thoughts you might like to go there?

Downham: Not really I did my National service and I'd always wanted to get out of Liverpool! I suppose, quite fond of mountains never a rock gymnast or anything like that! But after National service I went to Kenya and worked in East Africa there from 1955-59, and my contract was terminated. So I, this is a strange story I'd heard about FIDS, Falkland Islands Dependences Survey, but I was up Kilimanjaro actually of all things! And it was just after the International Geophysical Year and I don't know the fellow's name or anything and he mentioned it, and I decided to write because my contract was coming towards an end. I worked with the Kenya Police and then I was seconded to the Game Department on anti-poaching work on big game poaching. And so I wrote to Bill Sloman, do you know who he is? Yeah, wrote to Bill Sloman and I was on field work all the time and I got a very encouraging letter back.

[0:02:16] Lee: What was it that made you want to go to the Antarctic?

Downham: The Adventure, in two words!! [Lee: Ha! Ha!] I'm not a very good interviewee I'm afraid!?

[0:02:32] Lee: You are doing OK, did you have an interview?

Downham: Well what happened was is, I'd written to Bill Sloman and then I took off for 4 or 5 months and I climbed in the Rwenzori. I climbed Kilimanjaro again and then I drove with some South Africa friends from Kampala in Uganda, down to Cape Town. And I hitch hiked round South Africa for 4 months or something and then I climbed a bit in the Drakensberg and that sort of thing, so I didn't get back to UK 'til late and I called in at Crown Agents and they were talking as if I almost had a job, so to me I just followed that call!

[0:03:23] Lee: So you yes, it was a bit of a shoe-in was it?

Downham: I'd done a lot of field work I mean all the time there I was either under canvas or under a bivouac sheet. I'd always camped a lot and always, I just loved the outdoors and I loved that type of life so it just came together.

[0:03:44] Lee: You were signed up as a Meteorologist I believe?

Downham: That's right yeah!

[0:03:47] Lee: Did you know anything about meteorology ?

Downham: No I didn't, I didn't really want to! But I've just visited a friend in Trujillo Spain who I did a couple of winters with, and bummed through South America later and neither of us had any interest in weather it was a means of getting to the Antarctic!

[0:04:11] Lee: Ha! Ha! Is this Geoff Renner we are talking about?

Downham: No, he's my brother in law, did you know that?

[0:04:16] Lee: Yeah, I did we'll come back to that later if I may?

Downham: OK, I was with Geoff last week.

[0:04:23] Lee: Right, OK. So did they train you in Meteorology before you went down south?

Downham: No, I went into the Met course in Stanmore, yeah Stanmore. Went to down to, I was posted to Admiralty Bay and we did a little over 6 months trip there, it wasn't the best of trips I was kind of always, I suppose it may sound arrogant I was always keen to go. And there had been 2 nasty fatalities the previous year and the geologist that year Dick Barton, Colin Barton we called him Dick, because of Dick Barton special agent etc!! And Dick Wright and myself went off for 6 months and it the weather was awful! And probably the worst trip I did in the time I was there, I doubt we did more than 200 or 300 miles in that 6 months? But we were very dependent on all the rocks, have you been to Antarctica!?

[0:05:42] Lee: Yeah!

Downham: Have you been to King George Island? [Lee: No!] Well all the outcrops are down the bottom, and in order to get to them you have to go up on to plateau, travel along the plateau and find the right route down, otherwise you are going over icefalls it's probably a lot worse now! And it was permanently in cloud so we were stuck down below, then we'd go up get along the top and we'd be coming down to another outcrop, as a geologist that's what he had to do. And we'd get trapped in cloud up on the top, and we spent really just over 6 months laid up, but while I was there I had applied to go to Hope Bay.

[0:06:31] Lee: So Admiralty bay was a kind of taster was it really? [Downham: Yeah!] Did it not put you off, the fact you weren't doing much? Apart from being cold!

Downham: You know, I'm pretty bloody minded in that way I don't get put off too easily!
 [Lee: Ha! Ha!] No, no I went to Hope Bay and we had a good year, that year I did an awful lot of sledging that year!

[0:06:55] Lee: Did you come home, between Admiralty Bay [Downham: No, no] You went straight across to Hope Bay?

Downham: Yes, I'd didn't get there till the end of January, I think by the end of that calendar year, I from the end of January I was away from base 42,43 weeks. Virtually all the time, I only had about 3 or 4 weeks on base!

[0:07:15] Lee: Was it fun or purgatory [Downham: What's that?] Was it fun or purgatory!?

Downham: I'm not a masochist! It was fun!

[0:07:27] Lee: You went to Hope bay as a General Assistant, GA [Downham: Yeah] which gave you more scope?

Downham: They'd stopped doing met at Hope Bay that season, mainly because the weather was so localised because of Mt Francis and all that.

[0:07:46] Lee: You did a lot of sledging at Hope bay, some 3,000 miles?

Downham: Oh no, close to three, think it was just about 20 or 30 miles short of 3,000!

[0:07:57] Lee: Yeah, and you had your own team?

Downham: I took over the 'Terrors' from Neil Orr.

[0:08:01] Lee: Terrors? [Downham: Yeah!] Oh! From Neil OK so how did you take to sledging then?

Downham: How did I take to? [Lee: Sledging?] Oh, I loved it, I probably did close to 9,000 miles in total down there I loved it! I mean obviously it's very dangerous and, and but what else do I say? The dogs, you mustn't lose sight of the fact that we were supporting geologist, geophysicists and surveyors and we did an awful lot of it, depot running but spent most of that year with Dick Harbour, I don't know if you have interviewed him? In fact I met him last week at the Hope Bay thing before I went to Spain and he took me down to my brother-law's just outside Cambridge. And of course we revisited everything and I spent a lot of the year with Dick and most of the rest of the year, with a fellow called Adrian Allen he died some years ago he was a geophysicist and the only other trip I did apart from some depot running that year, was with Neil Aikenhead and John Winham. I saw Neil last week actually, we had a great visit, 'Neddy' we used to call him, after the *Goon Show*! No I loved it, and in effect that's why I went back again, Mike Smith who I saw in Trujillo in Spain just Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and then we came out and we travelled through South America and then we went down again together for a lot?

[0:10:11] Lee: Did you have any close calls while you were sledging any sticky moments?

Downham: Are you talking that year? [Lee: Any year?] Oh, I had some very close calls!

[0:10:21] Lee: Tell me about them?

Downham: Well you have probably read it haven't you? [Lee: I want to hear your version!] Well when I went back to Stonington, I went back as Base Leader at Hope Bay.

[0:10:33] Lee: In '63?

Downham: Well, late '63- '64 was the main year, was it yeah '63 you're right! I then I took some of the dogs from there, we were talking about this last week and Roger Robson and myself were the only ones there at the close and we were trying to puzzle out, because I think we sent two teams to Halley?

[0:10:00] Lee: The close of Hope Bay?

Downham: We were closing Hope Bay, the ship I think it was one of the 'Dan' ships *Kista Dan* one of the Danish ships.

[0:11:11] Lee: Yeah, *Perla Dan*?

Downham: Was it the *Perla*? [note: It was most likely the *Kista*!]. Yeah one them anyway, they were named after the daughters of the owner, and we send two teams, certainly one team and probably a bunch of odd dogs, I'm not sure we were trying to sort it out last week and Roger who attends a lot of these things, as I say I have been an absentee for so long. Done a lot other things since then, my memory was right up on it, we then, I took the rest of the teams down to Stonington, so I didn't, I was Base Leader that year, but I didn't close Hope Bay I handed over to Rod Walker, deputy Base Leader, to close it, because of the ships. Then we took the dogs down, we got stuck off Adelaide but we finally got in to Stonington, well you asked about dangers, the next year I went right down a hole with the whole team!

[0:12:14] Lee: Tell me about that, describe what happened?

Downham: Have you heard of 'Bill's Gulch'?

[0:12:20] Lee: I haven't! 'Bill's Gulch' yeah?

Downham: Yeah, it's a Hell hole!! Actually you asked me, Mike Wilkinson who later died in Cameroon leading a climb they were bombarded by African bees he worked for the outward bound. He and I came up the 'Beehive', have you heard of the 'Beehive'? [Lee: Yes go on.] And it was a bloody Beehive I'll tell you that it was awful!! And, yeah him, John Mansfield and I had been over on the West Coast, we'd lost our tent and the whole lot! So that was a close one, we lived back in a pup tent and it was a horrible one actually it was a real funnel we were in, I don't know if it's in the book or not, is that in Fuchs' book?

[0:13:07] Lee: This is April '63 we are talking about? [Downham: Yeah, is that when it was!] When your tent blew away!?

Downham: I didn't get on terribly well with Sir Viv!

[0:13:15] Lee: I might ask you about that in a minute, just talk me through the losing of the tent in April '63.

Downham: The losing of the tent, yeah I'm trying to collect my thoughts and make order of them, you asked if I'd had sticky moments?

[0:13:29] Lee: This is Aureole Hills?

Downham: It was on the west coast, on the West Russell yeah! It was, yeah a little bit have you gathered from previous interviews at Hope Bay is a wind tunnel? And that was the thing, it was a vicious one and our tent was rocking and we had it buried down well, we'd been on a lie up and I'd been over there, with Adrian and John Cheek the Falkland Islander and kind of knew the lay of the land reasonably. And we, I'm trying to collect my thoughts as I'm talking here, and we were camped and it was a stickler there's no other word to describe it! And so we got fully dressed and packed our rolls up and the tent went!! And we managed to swivel the apex round into the wind, before the tent went, what had happened is was one of the pickets had pulled and the dogs had hit it, which helped it go, we didn't know what the hell was happening!?

[0:14:39] Lee: The dogs hit the tent?

Downham: Yeah, one of the teams did, but we didn't know what the hell was happening outside, if we'd gone out we'd have been blown over! So usually in the Northern peninsula especially, I've lived in Canada for 43 years we call them Chinooks they call them [Therms?]. Down there it's normally one blessing is, that when it's so violent the temperature is warmer, that's why it's violent it's the air currents, we call them [Therms?] I was at a valley in Austria I believe or something? So the tent went and the next day it did calm down, we did get a break, it was devastating, it was horrible!! So we pulled everything together and we limped back to base in a pup tent.

[0:15:38] Lee: You survived the night in the other tent didn't you, all crowded in?

Downham: In a pup tent, yeah. I don't [know] anything about John Mansfield since? Because I've not been in touch with him at all, as I say Mike Wilkinson, superb fellow, died in a tragic mountaineering accident in Cameroon.

[0:16:00] Lee: Did all the dogs survive that wind?

Downham: No, we didn't lose any dogs there at all!

[0:16:04] Lee: You didn't?

Downham: Not that I remember, does it say so in the book?

[0:16:06] Lee: I think it does, you lost one!

Downham: Did we lose one?

[0:16:12] Lee: I'd have to look at again, I'm pretty sure it does [Note: Fuchs does say 1 dog was strangled!?] You can't remember losing any dogs?

Downham: I can't recollect. [Lee: OK!]

[0:16:21] Lee: Closing Hope Bay, I know you weren't there for the final rites, but you were there?

Downham: Thank God!!

[0:16:27] Lee: Well quite, as Base Commander when it was destined to be closed.

[Downham: Yeah] How was that for you, being in charge of a base that was?

Downham: Bitterly disappointing, because I think it was a bad decision!!

[0:16:35] Lee: What was wrong with the decision?

Downham: Simply because of the geography of Hope Bay, and that may come up later in your story, and I then went and took over Stonington.

[0:16:46] Lee: No let's just think about why, what was their excuse for closing Hope Bay?

Downham: I have a feeling that Vivian Fuchs he never liked Hope Bay!? Now you can take this or leave it do what you want with it, I don't give a dam! To be quite honest, and we did, do you know who John Green was?

[0:17:20] Lee: He was the Secretary wasn't he?

Downham: Well he was also Operations Manager and I didn't get on too badly with John Green and we talked about this one, and as I said to John 'I don't know why Marguerite Bay, I'd never been there'. And I said 'We've got depots all the way to Robinson, Cape Robinson we've got a series of depots', I think we had some on Fairweather, we certainly had quite a few at Longing which at that time was the start of the shelf. I've watched but that's all gone now, but at that time I'm talking about, we had the capability of moving depots farther south. I did not know Stonington at that time going over the top, as I understood at that time was not easy, we had to go over Sodabread, we went up the Amphitheatre rather than the year before, they did a slightly different route and Bill's Gulch is a hell hole and I'll come to that after!? And, but sometimes it's easier to do 30 miles a day with 9 dogs and a 1,000lbs on your sledge than it is to sit and wait in cloud, and I've been prejudiced by my time in Admiralty Bay quite a bit right, than it is to trying to haul stuff, whatever Sodabread was, we used to call it 'Sodomy Slope'. I went through this with Kevin Walton nearly 20 years ago at Ken Pawson's at Calgary in Alberta. The depots were there and we'd been better off for a lot programme that went from Hope Bay, no Stonington, Tony Marshall the guy Stubbs, who incidentally I visited last week, Guy Stubbs an brother-in-law Geoff Renner. To have come up and taken the Hope Bay depots down because, once you got on the shelf at Longing, it started a bit before Longing once you got on the shelf at the end of the Gustav Channel it was plain sailing! And have you dog sledged at all?

[0:19:55] Lee: No.

Downham: Well, once the dogs have a track you know, then they go and you come back on the track and pick up I talked of a 1,000lb's, but if the dogs are following a track and if you have a dog team, following a ladies team, they'll pull 1,500lb's !!

[0:20:14] Lee: Yeah!

Downham: No problem! And you have got a big track, so we could have worked a lot easier and I convinced Johnny Green of that. But Sir Viv didn't! My theory is he didn't like Hope Bay very much and he said 'No you are going into Stonington'!

[0:20:39] Lee: Do you know why, do you have a theory why he didn't like Hope Bay? Was it the poor weather conditions?

Downham: No it was it was just one of those things, Hope Bay had done a lot of dog sledging and there was inter-base rivalry let's put it in those terms, and he'd never wintered at Hope Bay! Ken Blaiklock had been at Hope Bay earlier and quite honestly Ken Blaiklock had done an awful lot more sledging than Fuchs had, I did a considerable amount more for that matter!

[0:21:15] Lee: Did you not have much respect for Fuchs generally?

Downham: I'd more respect for Johnny Green let's put it that way, I think he was more down to earth!

[0:21:15] Lee: So when the time came, when the instructions came to close down Hope Bay and you were still there as Base Commander, how did you go about doing that?

Downham: Well we'd, I'd already gone through that at Admiralty Bay we packed everything, we got everything that we could ready, ready as possible. But then I escaped the final thing because I went down to Marguerite Bay, and Rod Walker and Mike Smith my buddy who I just saw in Spain the other day and John Mansfield, Roger Robson and Mike Wilkinson they all took over.

[0:22:05] Lee: You did 2 sessions at Hope Bay, '61 and '63 and you came back to Hope Bay again in '63 as the Base Commander that time, and there were the 'Terrors' still there, I guess they were still there were they?

Downham: A geologist, was it Dave Elliot?

[0:22:21] Lee: I expect so I don't really know.

Downham: Took them over, and he just did one season and then I went back and took them over again, I took them down to Stonington too.

[0:22:30] Lee: Was it the same 9 dogs?

Downham: Well obviously you got replacements, we brought in I've forgotten the dogs' names! We brought in 'Kelly' & 'Princess' I wish I had my notes with me.

[0:22:47] Lee: It doesn't matter, don't worry!

Downham: But I still had, still had, I ran 'MacBrin', 'Cain', 'Abel', 'Karl', 'Iona' the main ones.

[0:23:03] Lee: Were they pleased to see you again, 2 years later?

Downham: I wonder if my border collie's going to be pleased to see me when, I get back? 'Course she is, but will she recognize me, I think so, but yeah they were. And I did 3 seasons with those, the six I just mentioned and I probably did 7 or 8 and half thousand miles with them, and you can't do with dogs in that environment and not be very attached to them you know, and I like animals that's why I'm still sheep farming after all these years!

[0:23:44] Lee: Tell me the significant runs you did from Hope Bay, what was the one you remember most?

Downham: I just mentioned I did a lot with surveyors, with Dick Harbour. From Hope Bay the most significant run was probably from Stonington, we came up to Hope Bay in my final season, then we went all the way back. And we were swapping partners all the time, just for a change, you know get on each other's nerves after awhile! And we'd meet up and swap partners and then we would do a cross traverses geology so I mean, from Hope Bay the most significant trip, probably with Dick Harbour we went down to just south of Jason. We done a, we done an astro-fix at Cape Worsley, and with Adrian Allen the geophysicists we were doing a one mile grid, that's not significant you're going a mile you need well trained dogs because you are going on a compass traverse and everything and what you are doing, you are doing fixes on the various sights all the time, so they, the most significant trip probably down to Jason, having done a lot of other things and back again at Hope Bay.

[0:25:12] Lee: Yeah, but obviously the biggest, the most significant trip was while you were at Stonington, in '64 and you took the team back to Hope Bay?

Downham: Yeah, I don't want you to get the wrong impression here that I did that, I talked to Johnny Green about it before, right! And I don't want you to get the impression, that I did that to prove any point. What happened is, I went to Stonington and I was in charge of the 'East Coast Project' and Base leader at Stonington and John Cunningham who was quite a climber was at Adelaide and was in charge of the 'Sound Project' and you can see I've been in north America a lot, I don't say project, I say project! And I've still got the accent, but it's the words I use and my grand kids are pure blood Canadians and my kids!

So I, we hauled about, have you heard the name John Cheek? He was a Falkland Islander, well 'Cheeko' and I had done quite a bit together and we knew each other well and we, so I met him in Banff at a Commonwealth Parliamentarian's conference in the early '90's sometime he died not long after that unfortunately. And we did revisit quite a bit of this stuff then, and 'Cheeko' was a Falkland Islander, a big strong fellow and he had the 'Komats' and

so I said 'Look Cheeko', he was wireless operator he only came down later, he didn't come down early enough to get on the field programme and I said 'For God's sake get as much as you can up on top!' while we did the autumn trip just before winter. And we did a two month's trip then and we went over Bill's Gulch and we had quite a good trip so 'Cheeko' and the rest of us, he was a big player in that we got 5 tons over the top. You know, when you think of Kevin Walton many years earlier and that lot, and 2 Ton Depot was their ultimate achievement, we took 5 tons over and carried on! And thanks largely to 'Cheeko' who knew how to get dogs to work, if the dogs didn't take it, he was a big man he would carry the bloody thing up himself, marvellous fellow! An' I saw the difficulty we'd had a lot of trouble with Bill's Gulch, and I'm wandering off on the Stonington now aren't I!?

[0:27:55] Lee: It's OK, carry on, carry on!

Downham: And coming back from the *fall* trip, from the autumn trip, you don't get *fall* in Antarctica, *fall* is when the leaves fall, there's no leaves down there! So the autumn trip I went down with the whole team and, I'm not sure think we left, we lost one or two dogs down the hole and one, it'll be in the book or *Dogs and Men* one of them? Then we had to kill one or two on top and throw them back down it was pretty brutal, a horrible place! And then I saw the difficulty in taking stuff over the top, and I'd already talked to Johnny Green because I thought we'd be better, and I wasn't trying to prove a point, please believe me on that! Had we, we had Tony Marsh, Guy Stubbs and Geoff Renner Geophysicist and two geologists they had this field programme, and we had the programme it was based on air support, which we weren't getting not because of the pilots it was Ted Skinner and Bill Mills who lives in Edmonton now actually, it was because of the weather! The weather on the east was never the same as on the west etc!! And I just plain decided to, we'd better off to stop it at the southernmost Hope Bay depots, once we started doing that Geoff Renner the geophysicist decided he'd like to tie in with all Adrian Allen's previous year geophysical work up north and that's why we started, we did the whole tie. It wasn't to do with any to prove a point for any reason and I suppose I'm quite proud of that season because we achieved over 2 years' programmes based on air support, with very minimal air support.

Lee: Right.

Downham: And I don't know if you have got some of that stuff there? It was probably the best thing I ever did because I travelled through with Geoff Renner and then went to visit when we got back and met a beautiful 21 year old!!

[0:30:25] Lee: His sister?

Downham: Yeah, I'm going to cry!!

[0:30:30] Lee: I know, I know! So this two years, at Stonington you did two years' work in on season basically? Because of the quality of the sledging?

Downham: Better, better really!

[0:30:40] Lee: And the decision to go to Hope Bay, part of the success of that two years?

Downham: Well, I'd promoted that earlier but our work was quite far south, and Guy's was and Tony's. Tony's was more or less a bit north of Guy's, north of Tonkin by Robinson not quite as far north as Jason if you know the geography there and so it was in part of that.

[0:31:09] Lee: Is that what was called the 'East Coast Project' is that what you are talking about?

Downham: Yeah!

[0:31:15] Lee: So you were basically surveying the eastern side of?

Downham: Not surveying no, geology! Two geologists and a geophysicist

[0:31:21] Lee: Oh, right I beg your pardon! Did they find anything surprising, in their geology work?

Downham: Well it was routine mapping and you'd, have you interviewed Tony Marsh yet?

[0:31:31] Lee: Not yet, no.

Downham: He's in Paraguay now, he's an amateur ornithologist, he's looking at birds yeah, I may get a chance to meet up with him, I go back a week today, and we may get together in London, I'm not sure, yeah next week. You'd have to talk to Tony or Guy in Ludlow, I was there last week.

[0:31:56] Lee: Guy Stubbs, he's in Ludlow is he, oh right?

Downham: Yeah, I was there last Saturday Geoff and I went over. Tony Shearer came over from Betws-y-coed so we had a little get together, yeah.

[0:32:11] Lee: Let's look at these scary moments then, I think you were part way through one story and I think there are others to tell as well?

Downham: Well, I did mention the tent going over on the West Russell and then we limped back to base, we made it back. And of the first two years, two seasons that was probably the scariest! We did go off the Beehive it's very well named actually, we went up the Beehive, but it wasn't bad we'd had some pretty well compacted snow there. Because it was just off the Russell, and I said the wind came over the gap off the Russell right, and the wind came over and drifted in quite well and so we had no trouble with that, so can't say it was a scary moment! I will say that was the only really scary moment in the first two seasons, then going down Hope Bay that was obviously every time you run on to sea ice and every time. We went on the 'overland route' before the ice, because I've always been an impatient character and my kids give me hell for it at this stage! And we went down on the 'overland route' and that was not easy, the sea ice had not formed in the Gustav there was too many big open leads and so we got along it, and then we carried on. But by the time we came back it was open!

Dick Harbour and I did have a bit of a tricky one off, just south of 'VP', of View Point. We ran out on to, there'd been a slip of fresh snow on to frozen ice and it was a lead and we

didn't realise it! A team went out on it, not more than 30 yards and seals started popping their heads up, and I just went, I can't do it anymore because of dentures [IRRE!!] And got them to come right round and they were brilliant and they came back, we were on ice about that thick [very thin!!] But we didn't know because there was fresh snow on top! And it was a little tidal race, so that was the only ones then. Even my first year and my third of my second tour, I think really significant, we did go and went out on the autumn trip from Stonners and coming back, not sure how many teams we had? Think we had 4 or 5, there was 6 of us but I think one fellow, I think what had happened was that Guy Stubbs and Tony Shearer we call him 'Umlaut' because it's a Cha with an *umlaut* on top to distinguish him from Tony Marsh. 'Umlaut' and Guy had gone over a cliff, Guy's shoulder is still way out of 'wack'! Last week, we were talking about it, I don't know if I'm speaking loud enough or not?

[0:35:42] Lee: Yeah, yeah its fine!

Downham: So we, I went with the two of them really, covered the rest with themselves, that was from 3 sites 3 parties had met up and we were coming back over Bill's Gulch over the plateau, down Sodabread and Geoff Renner was the final team and we alternated lead and I was next to last with the 'Terrors' that day and Geoff saw a big gaping hole with a trace stuck in it!! And he caught up with next team forward, not sure who it was and said 'I know what's happen'. And they came back and I was down the hole probably an hour I don't know, it was big enough to take a double-decker bus and I had whimpering dogs all over the place, it was a horrible place!

[0:36:40] Lee: So this is Bill's Gulch you are talking about?

Downham: Yeah, Bill's Gulch yeah.

[0:36:.43] Lee: So you went down, was it just you that went down or everything, you the dogs?

Downham: Yeah, the sledge, the whole team the lot, we were all down there!

[0:36:52] Lee: So what did you land on, if anything?

Downham: Well you see, one of the dogs had gone over, when we were doing a lot of this slide slalom??? [phonetic] to avoid the worse ice falls and of course the dogs went they are following will always try to cut in and what happened the bridge gave under me! I believe the dogs were over, well I went down on the bridge and then all I can remember down there is 'plump-plump', thank God none of them landed on me! So I went down with the sledge and then the dogs were dragged back in!

[0:37:31] Lee: So had the sledge become wedged at some point? [Downham: What's that my?]

[0:37:36] Lee: So what broke the sledges fall?

Downham: I went down on the bridge the ice bridge!

[0:37:40] Lee: Oh the bridge went as well?

Downham: The bridge went! And I think it wasn't like going down on an elevator it was pretty abrupt, but I think I went down on the ice bridge and fell into soft snow at the bottom!

[0:37:52] Lee: Right, so you got to the bottom of the crevasse?

Downham: Yes I was down a long way, yeah!

(0.37.56:)Lee: What a hundred foot?

Downham: It was over, because when they came back I saw Geoff's sledge go over the edge and I thought 'Oh Christ I've had it'!! And I was trying to work out if I could have got out, how I could get out, it would have been a hell of a job! And anyway, I'm not sure of how much later with whimpering dogs all over the place it was awful and a head came over and I holler up, better not record this 'Where the f---ing hell have you been'!? And then a load of, I'd broken a thumb and my nose but I was OK and I had 'Kelly' up on a ledge, he'd snapped his trace he was up on a ledge about fifty feet above one of the dogs, whimpering away like all hell and he didn't jump down, anyway so I had the rest of them down, I think what happened, I'm trying to think! One of them died there, and *did we* them out and then had to put two down up top and then send them down? Geoff has it in *Dogs and Men* and anyway I wrote everything up, we got everything we had to out of the hole, the dogs and then what happened a head came over and they lowered a rope down and I hollered up, 'Look it's not longer enough so', and that was a hundred foot rope so they added another rope on, so I was down a good hundred and twenty feet! Yeah I was down a good 120 feet and got all the dogs out as I say I'm not sure if we left one down there? And then, they lowered, no they didn't I had them with me. Do you know what jumar stirrup's are?

[0:40:01] Lee: No, no.

Downham: You put a weight on the end of your rope and there's a stirrup's you put your feet in, and they run up the rope then lock, so you walk up the rope like that. [Lee: Yeah] I mean I'd been down 4 or 5 hours at this stage or whatever.

[0:40:18] Lee: So you were getting tired?

Downham: I was pretty played out, and I came to the knot where the two ropes had been joined and I just couldn't manipulate round it I'd had it. And there was a head leader, he was roped up I think it was Ed Thornton but I'm not sure, he was roped up and he was guiding it, and I said 'For F's sake'! So they hooked me on to one of the teams, and I gather I came shooting out like a cork from a champagne bottle!! But I came out of the hole then, it was Guy got hold of me and they had a warm tent and whipped me in and warmed me up. Then a couple of months later we were going back over down Bill's Gulch and Guy dropped a 100 feet down, but he was not too badly done and he managed to climb out yeah.

[0:41:10] Lee: Did, was the sledge recovered?

Downham: Just Guy!

[0:41:14] Lee: No when you went down?

Downham: It was shattered! It was still left down there.

[0:41:17] Lee: It's still there now.

Downham: Yeah, it's probably in the South Atlantic somewhere! [Lee: Ha! Ha!]

[0:41:23] Lee: Does it, how badly does that kind of episode shake you up, shake your confidence?

Downham: I went back over, no it didn't really I was young and stupid!

[0:41:39] Lee: Immortal!?

Downham: Do you know this is a state of life I'm in my late 70's now. I should be doing parachute jumps and things like that because I'm not going to have a lot of life yet [Lee: Ha! Ha!] Because you do things arse about don't you!!? [Lee: Ha! Ha!]

[0:41:57] Lee: You were, Bill Sloman offered you a job didn't he? (Downham: He did) At the end of your 4th season when you'd done your last year at Stonington, oh sorry!?

Downham: Where did you get that from?

[0:42:09] Lee: I don't know, I just know it! Before we get to that bit, did you then also get involved with closing Stonington? [Downham: In?]

[0:42:17] Lee: Did you get involved in closing Stonington?

Downham: No, [Lee: No?] it carried on after I left!

[0:42:23] Lee: OK it carried on?

Downham: The fellow who took over, I saw his obituary a month or two ago, I never knew him too well, 'til the hand over. He had a lodge by Snowdonia in North Wales Betws-y-coed area, I'll think of the name? Cousins, something Cousins? [note: Mike] And we did have another tricky one and that was with Geoff when we'd gone all the way up to Hope Bay and Guy and Tony almost went to Hope Bay, we were hauling depots down. And after the crevasse fall we dropped Guy off, Guy Stubbs off at Matienzo the Argentine base and then Tony and I shuttled loads down, I don't know how to explain this to you?

But we'd been down to -54C. south of Robinson and the dogs lungs were freezing up on us, they couldn't work as soon they inhaled they couldn't work we were down to 2 or 3 miles a day. The runners wouldn't run on the sledge, it was a tough one and then we got it, it wasn't a [Therm?] But a warming and instead of doing 2 or 3 miles a day, we went right up to 25 or 20 to 25 and so that solidified the decision because I knew where all the Hope bay depots were! It may sound very arrogant this, but I knew the east coast as well as anyone at that stage. I just, I was on my 3rd year there and I'd sledged up and down, in and out doing everything in all that time, so it just made more sense. We had to leave Guy, we were going

through it the other day, last Saturday, at Matienzo to recover from the crevasse fall he wasn't too bad he's a tough one. And Tony Shearer and myself, 'Umlaut' and myself, shuttling loads from Crystal Hill to various depots down, we were arguing about the depot at Robinson and Tony Shearer, 'Umlaut' had said last Saturday, said we didn't find anything there, and of course Guy said 'Yes we did cause there was cigarettes there!' And so we did!

[0:44:53] Lee: He remembers the FAGS!?! [Ha! Ha!]

Downham: Yeah, yeah, so we got our loads down and so from that point of view it was a good decision and as I say the final results of that year indicate that it was good!

[0:45:15] Lee: Were you given credit for that decision, were you thanked?

Downham: I don't really know I don't! I think the only credit I want is appreciation from my peers! And one of who is my brother-in-law and the other two are consistently in touch with me in the most positive way, so the other two scientists that year so you know I'm not worried about any other things.

[0:45:47] Lee: Bill Sloman must have appreciated it, because he actually offered you this job didn't he?

Downham: He did yeah!

[0:45:50] Lee: Well first tell me what this job was?

Downham: Well what happened is we were doing quite well at Stonington and we did tempt providence, brother-in-law Geoff went down on Snow the other glacier going off from Neny, Snowshoe was it? About 40 feet and nothing came of it, and then Geoff and I had sea ice breaking up when we were coming down from Hope Bay they were tricky bits but we got through it all OK! We had a very good year. John Cunningham, I knew John very well, it was the most honourable way that he died way back in 80 or when it was because I'm from Liverpool and myself, wife and kids were over at that time, I didn't know he had passed away. Very honourable situation off Anglesey etc, so I don't want to be put into the position of being negative about John, but he was a climber he was not a scientist which I'm not. But he did not concentrate on getting the job done, he wanted to climb mountains and do things like that, and 99% of dog sledging is just plain bloody graft and hard work!

Right you've got to get your scientists to the job and they sent the *Shack* [*Shackleton*] over to Stonington, it couldn't come in and get up to base, we went out to the edge of the sea ice and I climbed up the rope ladder and got on. And we whipped over to Adelaide and think that's how it went yeah anyway we were just off Adelaide, this is before Rothera right, we were just off Adelaide and we went up to Kelly Johnson he was the captain of the *Biscoe* and went up to his cabin and Bill was the senior head office guy down and Tom Woodhead? [note: Woodfield] I'm trying to think they thought then they were going to have to cut back a lot the next year, and Bill said 'Well', and John Cunningham was there too, 'we are agreed that so-so', I said 'Hang on all the Stonington guys are going they've just had a hell of a good year, I don't mean that negatively a very good year!' They have just achieved, in fact the

PhD's that came out of it illustrate it, with one year normally you've got to have at least two. And Bill looked over at 'Cunners' and he didn't say anything, I said 'Let's be fair about this you know'! And what had happened is that some of the guys, I heard this later this is just hearsay, at Adelaide had been saying to John, to 'Cunners', 'Why can't we go to the working area, the Stonington guys are over there doing their job, why can't we?' 'Cunners' kept saying to them 'The sea ice isn't safe enough'. Well there'd been a bit of shit disturbing here because 'Cheeko' a marvellous guy I know him very well had a lot of the devil in him, asked me if I minded him going up to Horseshoe which was just over from Adelaide on the mainland it used to be called 'Y' and it's a big song we were all out of ice axes and all kinds of stuff and rope. I said, 'Yeah, but for god's sake be careful'! And he did but the cheeky bugger, I'll put it in those terms, decided to whip over to Adelaide. And he walked into base and John 'Cunners' is defending not going, and said 'I've just come for tea!' He had a cup of tea and buggered off back to Stonington, to Horseshoe and down to Stonington! Well of course that caused a lot of trouble too!

Anyhow I don't know what happened after that because I was on the east coast, I was on the east coast when that happened we went through that when I met him in Banff first, some years ago on a visit. And so he, Bill Sloman, turned to me and said, I can't remember they was some coming and going, I can't remember if John went out, if 'Cunners' went out and Woodward [Woodfield]? And Bill Sloman said, 'Well,' he said 'You shouldn't go down for a second lot you've had some lucky runs'! And I said 'Well I want you to know', and I said 'Well OK'! That's in between the two tours right and he said 'Look I've got to, I strongly advise you against it but I've got to offer you the overall field leadership of the Sound Project of the two bases'! I'm not the best, as you might have guessed at doing inventories and all the crap so there was going to be, I was going to be in charge in the field next.

[0:51:19] Lee: So he offered you this job, and advised you not to take it?

Downham: No, he said to me I strongly advise you not to take it! Person to person, [Lee: Right]

But he said for the sake of the Survey, I'm offering you the job?

[0:51:33] Lee: Right, did he think you weren't up to it or did he think the job was a crap job?

Downham: Oh no! I think he thought I was up to it but he, we'd had some near escapes that year and I think maybe I was getting bushed! Maybe I had the 'stir' I don't know and it would have been a 3rd year, and Bill was always against 3rd years!

[0:51:52] Lee: Right because of complacency?

Downham: Well not just complacency but 3rd years but I think they was only one fellow Ian Fothergill, 'Fothers' we called him who died a year or two ago. And I'd been with him at Hope bay and 'Fothers' I think was the only one that did a 3rd year on a sledging base? There were others like Ken Back and others who did them on static bases, but sledging bases were a lot different, you tempt providence!?

[0:52:19] Lee: So you took his advice and turned it down?

Downham: Well I got on very well with Geoff and already I'd bummed through South America with Mike Smith earlier between my 2 tours and Geoff wanted to, and we came all the way up to North America that time and yeah I turned it down, we'd had a dicky year and I was in my 30's and I decided it was time too, yeah sometimes I regret not having done it I'd have liked to have gone down to the Sound and seen Fossil Bluff and Alexandra Land and all of that. And probably on the east coast down to Filchner and but, no I turned it down.

[0:53:06] Lee: You ended up sheep farming in Canada, and you still do?

Downham: I've 600 head there.

[0:53:13] Lee: Ha! Ha! At the age of 70?

Downham: What's that?

[0:53:17] Lee: At your age of? [Downham: 76!] 76, is there a story there, as you actually went into business with another Fid didn't you?

Downham: Yeah, it didn't last terribly long it was partnerships are sinking ships!! [Lee: Ha! Ha!] And especially as the farm is a tough one and it didn't last long and it was a bitter split up and I'd sooner not go into it, it was a fellow who'd been on the east coast, Ed Thornton.

[0:53:40] Lee: But there are other Fids, other Fids farming? [Downham: Others went out there, yeah!] Still?

Downham: Later, there's such a long story there, I came back and went to agriculture college at Llysfasi in North Wales and I'd already met Barb then through Geoff and a little courting and everything went on, because he, they'd from Whitley Bay, Newcastle. So I then met a fellow there who then came and emigrated with me, a couple of them did. One of them got a job with Fids, Dick Scoffom later, he then met Dickie Bird and they came back to Alberta and in effect our families grew up.

[0:54:25] Lee: Side by side?

Downham: Yeah, yeah!

[0:54:31] Lee: Was it a good life? Is it a good life, sheep farming in Canada?

Downham: I said at the beginning of this I'm not a masochistic I wouldn't still be doing it! I got into local politics and all that sort of stuff and I'm out of all that now.

[0:54:49] Lee: Looking back now over all that period of time there, I next quite often ask Fids this question, how does your time in the Antarctic rate in terms of highlights in your life?

Downham: It's one of the highlights, it's one of the highlights but it's not, do you want me to say it's the biggest one or?

[0:55:10] Lee: No, I want you to tell me how you feel about it?

Downham: Well I commanded anti-poaching teams in what is now Masai Mara in Kenya as a young man, and we had tremendous success and from what I hear, I'm very proud of what we achieved there, it's now one of the best national parks in Africa. And I bummed round South America that was a hard [South Africa?] South America twice and rode a bicycle from Miami up to Tennessee this sort of things they are all adventures which I enjoyed. Every lambing is an adventure and I've done 43 of them now! So what I do I say, I was chairman of the County Council I was 'Reeve' of the county so all that stuff, they were all highlights, I've had a terrific innings and I married a marvellous lady!!

[0:56:08] Lee: Noel, thank you very much indeed.

Interesting clips:

Finding out about FIDS on the top of an African mountain! [0:00:40]

Dog team down crevasse: [0:35:42]