

GEORGE KISTRUCK

Edited transcript of a recording of George Kistruck interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at Altrincham in Cheshire on 16th November 2001. BAS Archives reference AD6/24/3/011. Transcribed by Dawn Sutcliffe on 2nd March 2015.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is George Kistruck interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at Altrincham in Cheshire, on 16th November 2001. George Kistruck.

[0:00:13] Lee: What's a Fid?

Kistruck: Well a Fid is anybody who works for British Antarctic Survey or its predecessor which was Falkland Island Dependencies Survey, F-I-D-S, FIDS and the name has stuck.

[0:00:27] Lee: What are they like?

Kistruck: They're extremely versatile people I would say, if that's the common denominator. A Fid will turn his had to anything.

[0:00:35] Lee: Do they all have a pining for solitude?

Kistruck: Oh no, no I wouldn't say you could generalise to that. People, I think, go to Antarctica for all sorts of different reasons and once they've been there they find they have a common interest they didn't necessarily have that much before they went, I think; my opinion.

[0:00:58] Lee: Tell me about Marguerite Bay.

Kistruck: Marguerite Bay is an area at the south end of the Antarctic Peninsula, south of South America. It's not well defined on the map but it's a convenient term for the British Antarctic Survey bases that have been established in that area since war time, of which there are three principal ones. So rather than referring to them all by name it's easier just to talk about the Marguerite Bay bases.

[0:01:41] Lee: How do they nestle together geographically?

Kistruck: So geographically the two main bases are on the south end of Adelaide Island and it was just known as Adelaide Island base, and on Stonington Island, which is right close to the Antarctic mainland so they're about 40 miles apart. The reason why there are two, well it's historical really. Stonington Island was the first British base that was established in that

area in 1946 or 47; I'm not quite sure which¹. It was important because it gave access to the Antarctic mainland so you could get there from the sea, supply ships could supply a base there; and then travel over the surface of the land on the Antarctic mainland was possible. You could take your dog sledges onto the mainland so it was a sledging base. As time went on supply by sea wasn't the whole answer any more because air operations became more important during the 1960's, and so it was necessary to find a base where aircraft could operate and Adelaide Island was the best candidate for that. But the problem with Adelaide Island is that it is an island and so you can't reliably sledge from there onto the Antarctic mainland. So there needed to be two bases.

[0:03:01] Lee: Tell me about Fossil Bluff

Kistruck: Fossil Bluff which is my little red home in the south [laughs], that was established at the same time as Adelaide Island, originally just as a field base. It's a very small single shed the size of a garage but four people did spend a winter there in 1961 and again in 1962. This was part of the plan of establishing it, it was a geological field party that wintered there and of course conditions were pretty primitive. But, there is something special about that place and they survived it very well I think. I was very lucky in the late 1960's and 70's to spend two winters there myself. It changed my life I think. What it is about the place that gives it its tremendous atmosphere I find very hard to describe but I do remain very attached to it and I'm sad that it's no longer used as a home by anybody.

[0:04:02] Lee: Walk me towards the hut, and then we'll go inside.

Kistruck: Walking towards the hut, you've got off an aeroplane first of all. That's the way you get there, it's very unusual even in the old days to arrive at Fossil Bluff over land. You might have come with a dog sledge from Stonington Island but in either case you're approaching the hut from the direction of the air strip which is about half a mile away. So you walk over the surface of a glacier; there's snow there which crunches under your boots, and just as you approach the hut within about 20 yards you come off a snow and ice surface and you're now onto stones. It was thought this was a scree run coming off the mountains behind the base hut. In fact it turned out later on that these are stones lying on a tongue of ice but never mind, the base was built on what appeared to be stone in 1961 and has managed to stay there ever since. So you walk up a small stony slope with the hut on one side of you, on your left hand side, and there are boxes of supplies and provisions of various kinds on your right.

¹ Stonington Island base was established in February 1946 by FIDS

Past a meteorological screen full of instruments and you turn left into the hut door way. You open the door and it has a huge metal handle on it about 2 feet long, which drives wedge shaped bolts into a socket. Why do you need such a huge handle? Well you want to be jolly sure the door doesn't blow open during a blizzard, and you also want to be equally sure that after the blizzard you can open it again and get out of it. So you need quite a lot of leverage to make sure that you can dislodge any ice which has formed round the rim of the door way. So the handle goes 'clang' and the door swings open and you walk into the base hut.

[0:06:00] Kistruck: And straight in front of you as you walk in through the door, well you have to fight your way through a lot of clothes hanging up on the right hand side on some pegs, and in front of you is an area which was used as a workshop. So there's a bench there with a vice and some tools hanging on the wall and some batteries charging and things like that; workshopy things, that's on your right hand side, and there's a window there but usually you can't see out of it. On the left hand side, on the other hand, there are different sorts of supplies, things like flour and dried cabbage and things that you can eat in tins. So the larder and the workshop are absolutely cheek by jowl and it's not too difficult to keep the contents of each separate from each other. [laughs] If you turn left you go then into the main part of the hut and immediately on your right is the Rayburn stove² which is the heart of the place; burned anthracite which came in man portable plastic bags weighing 28 pounds as I recall. This was a major piece of the base resupply. If you haven't got enough fuel for the Rayburn to last you through the winter you were going to be pretty uncomfortable. So always when the aeroplanes turned up there were lots and lots and lots of these horrible pink dirty plastic bags of anthracite that needed to be handled.

[0:07:26] Kistruck: But anyway the Rayburn's there on your right and it keeps you warm, and just further to the right up against the wall is the kitchen area. Again with other things hanging up like mugs and flour sifters and up in the rafters there are Corn Flakes in large packets and things like that. On your left instead opposite the Rayburn is a tiny cubbyhole which we called the radio shack and maybe it was also the base office. It's a place where you could sit at a small horizontal area where you could actually write things in comfort. In addition to that we had a table in not quite the middle of the room. At the end of the room across the end of the hut there were 4 bunks, 2 up and 2 down in pairs. The table was up against the centre of the bunks, and to the left hand side as you approached the table it was the living room I suppose. There was a book case there and a record player which

² Rayburn stove is similar in nature to the AGA

worked off batteries if you were lucky, and the louder the music got the more the drain on the batteries, so the slower the turntable went and you got some interesting effects [laughs].

[0:08:35] Lee: Could you just add the words 'and all this in a room no bigger than...'

Kistruck: And all this in a room no bigger than a garage. It was 18 feet by 14 feet in total. So you can see 14 feet across the end gives you 2 times 7 feet for bunks and that's the way it was laid out. In terms of height it had a very strong metal portal frame structure with metal struts running across the width of the building which you could put things on. You could reach those standing on the floor so about seven feet off the floor were these rafters. The peak of the roof which was quite a flat slope was about another two and a half feet above that so it was just like a garage.

[0:09:20] Lee: Privacy?

Kistruck: Privacy well no there wasn't too much of that really. If you really wanted to be on your own you went outside usually. So you could walk around for a bit, even when it was dark there was enough twilight in the middle of the day to see where you were going for a couple of hours. Privacy, it's a funny thing. I think you probably lead a fairly private life of your own anyway when you're cheek by jowl with three other people and you know it's going to be many months before you see anybody else at all. You learn to find your own privacy in the crowd I think.

[0:10:04] Lee: Excellent answer thank you. Can you think of the quirky thing about the base?

Kistruck: Yes, well I suppose the base was really full of quirky things. For one thing was the marmalade, we liked our marmalade very much and didn't have a lot of it. So at the end of a winter season as we were going out on our own journeys, we were a bit dismayed that we hadn't finished all the marmalade and we knew that some raiders would come from Stonington Island base while we were away, and they were going to use our home just as a base and if they found some marmalade they would eat it. That was one of our quirks.

[0:10:44] Lee: So you took it with you?

Kistruck: No we didn't. We left it there and sure enough they ate it. We thought rightly that we would soon get some more. I suppose one quirky thing that I should own up to is that we spent the first winter that I was there without mains electric power at all. Although there was a generator there I

accidentally sabotaged it quite early on in our stay down there by dropping a spanner into the flywheel. Don't ask me how. The poor thing was very groggy thereafter so we didn't run it much. So we spent our first winter entirely on paraffin and anthracite for power. So we used Tilley lamps³ for lighting and anthracite for the Rayburn that was fine.

[0:11:34] Lee: What about the radio?

Kistruck: The radio; again we were fortunate, the radios we had by that time would work off small batteries which we could charge because we had a little battery charging generator, so we could run the radios ok. If we'd been of a much earlier vintage that would have been far more difficult but at that time it was ok.

[0:11:55] Lee: Every sense that you didn't feel any sense of danger?

Kistruck: Yes, I'd go along with that. I think I very seldom felt threatened with physical danger when I was there. Fossil Bluff itself didn't feel like a dangerous place, although actually you can die of frost bite quite easily: Die of exposure if you don't look after yourself properly. During other years there had been fairly epic events with people getting fairly seriously ill and breaking bones and that sort of thing. In terms of the field work that we did it generally was not dangerous, and the travel that we did of course, we took what would be sensible precautions.

[0:12:59] Lee: Tell me about the operation?

Kistruck: Oh the operation, that was an epic all right. Again we were very lucky. Of the four of us who were on the base, this was my second winter; two of us were out sledging, so we were out about 15 miles away from base. The other two were getting ready to come out and join us, during the course of which they were trundling some 45 gallon oil drums around on the gravel slope by the base. In the course of doing this one of us fell, Paul fell and cut his knee extremely badly on the rough stones that were there. It was a most extraordinary accident but he split the flesh across the front of his knee from side to side so deeply that you could actually see the bone of his knee cap! It was a gash about 3 inches long gapping open like a mouth through which you could see the knee cap. Not very nice; needed fixing in rather a hurry. I, as being the person in charge of the base that year, got this radio call, a bit like a phone call, from Malky the fourth one who was there on the base, saying this had happened to Paul that it might not be a

³ Small kerosene lamps

bad idea if we came back to base just in case any further support was necessary. So we set off fairly quickly to do that.

[0:14:21] Kistruck: Paul, the one who had gashed his knee, was extremely lucky in that it happened to be Malky who was with him. Because Malky in his first year and on a different base, although he was a mechanic by trade, had paid a lot of attention to the management of dog teams and had spent time with the doctor on that base who was spending quite a lot of time stitching up wounds that the dogs sometimes suffered. So Malky knew a bit about stitching and he knew a bit about how to sterilise instruments and things. Well we had those on the base it was just the skill for using them that was in short supply. So Malky boiled up his instruments and sterilised them alright and got his stitching together and he stitched up Paul's knee under instructions over the radio from a doctor in Adelaide Island which was our mother base, but completely inaccessible at that time of year. So Malky stitched up first of all the bottom layer close to the bone, stitching the muscles together, and then he stitched up the skin over the top. We had antibiotics and other sort of treatments if necessary and again under medical instruction from Adelaide Island, Malky turned into a medical attendant and did an extremely good job and Paul's knee recovered perfectly well with no problems at all. But we thought gosh, that's just an example of the sort of risk you run, and we were very luckily out of that one or it could have been serious, not just for Paul, but for the rest of us too. Because down there you depend on each other so much that if one person isn't able to contribute it means everybody feels it.

[0:16:02] Lee: Anaesthetic?

Kistruck: Yes, we had anaesthetics. We had anaesthetics of various kinds including morphine syringes; well they weren't syringes, they were a bit like a tube of toothpaste actually. It turned out that in the cold they didn't work very well so you had to be careful using those. I don't think, I might be wrong, but I don't think we used those on Paul on that occasion. It didn't need it; we used something else instead.

[0:16:40] Lee: We need to explain to the audience at home that of course Christmas is actually in the summer.

Kistruck: Yes

[0:16:45] Lee: Tell me about the two celebrations

Kistruck: Well first of all let me tell you about my first Christmas in Antarctica. I'll talk about mid-winter after that. In Christmas in Antarctica at this little

tiny shed, the size of a garage, we actually had 9 people there my first Christmas because one of the British Antarctic Survey aeroplanes was there with its crew and there were also some meteorologists because you need to have those at each end of the flight leg if you can when the aeroplanes are flying between Adelaide and Fossil Bluff. What had happened and this was not at all unusual, is that the weather had gone bad at Adelaide Island because after all it's on the coast by the sea, whereas Fossil Bluff being 200 miles from the sea has a beautiful climate which is one of the nice things about the place. So we were all basking in sunshine there in Antarctic mid-summer hanging around waiting for further resupply from Adelaide who couldn't provide it, and the aeroplane couldn't go away. So 9 people on this base, nothing to do but celebrate Christmas and of course we need a cake but we didn't have any icing sugar. I have a wonderful photograph of the plane pilot Burt grinding up granulated sugar in the mincer to make icing sugar for the cake [laughs] which he did. I think we probably had a professional cook with us as well. He was down with us for a sort of holiday because people who were normally base bound as part of their professional activities in Antarctica, if they didn't go out travelling they were allowed to go and visit other places for a short period during quiet times. So in the summer time people like meteorologists and cooks and others would come out to Fossil Bluff as a kind of holiday. Whereas for us, it was a holiday going back to the main bases where you could have a shower and do your laundry and that sort of thing.

[0:18:40] Lee: And you were telling me about booze?

Kistruck: Yes the alcohol. When we went into Fossil Bluff for my first winter we only just managed to get the supply situation sorted out. It hadn't been originally planned that the base would be occupied that winter. But as things turned out during the resupply season it became possible to contemplate it and so in the end it became a plan. But then other things happened and distracted the aircraft from completely resupplying the base according to the usual ration scale for a complete winter. So although there was enough of the basic things there, a lot of the luxuries hadn't been provided yet. In the end the flight which brought the last two of us in, took out one guy who wasn't staying there, a Met⁴ man who'd been doing the met for the aeroplanes. We only just managed to get the aeroplane unstuck from the runway at Adelaide Island because blizzards had happened and the skis had got frozen in and all that kind of stuff. So we ended up in taking off, we threw out a lot of the boxes that were in the fuselage just to reduce weight so we could get airborne which indeed we

⁴ Meteorologist

did. And of course the boxes that we'd chucked out were all the goody boxes with all the nice things in them.

[0:19:59] Kistruck: And in particular we found when we actually took stock of what we had got down in Fossil Bluff to last us through the winter; we were very short on alcohol and drinks, not that normally you would expect to have huge amounts of them anyway, but there was a ration and it was enough. We had 19 cans of beer and 12 bottles of spirits, mixed whisky and gin, to last us for a whole year among four people and so it wasn't a huge amount. What we decided to do was we'd save all the beer for mid-winter; we wouldn't try rationing that out. But we had one tot of spirits each on Friday nights when we were on the base, and save the beer for mid-winter which we did. So consequently we got into the habit of this and we used to really look forward to Friday nights because we would have our tot before going to bed and that was very convivial and sociable: Terrific, we really valued our grog! The second year when we were supplied on the normal scale we had enough, so that if we wanted to we could have a couple of cans of beer every now and then. There was certainly enough gin and whisky to keep us going because you don't want to over indulge in that sort of stuff too much. So consequently I noticed very much that we weren't looking forward to it and it wasn't the same sort of occasion when we had plenty compared with when we didn't have enough.

[0:21:21] Lee: Tell me about the special thing about mid-winter. Describe that to me.

Kistruck: Mid-winter was the big feast of the year because you're not doing anything very much around mid-winter; it's been dark and cold for an awful long time. It goes down into the mid 40's, -45 centigrade down at Fossil Bluff around that time of year. So although you can walk around outside in that it's not very comfortable to do it for very long. So you're confined into the hut, its dark outside, you're looking forward to something to make an event in life; and that's going to be the mid-winter celebrations. Everybody cooked different things and by the way everybody learns to cook at Fossil Bluff because you have to share it. So we made cakes, we made blancmanges and trifles. We had tinned chickens; it was about the nearest thing we could get to a turkey, and in the words of one of us when we actually opened this tin, it's about a 4 pint tin I suppose with a chicken in it, and what came out he described as a half-starved canary [laughs]. Well it was what we had so we ate that up alright and he could roast that. There was no shortage of advice over the radio from the other Marguerite bay bases like Adelaide and Stonington, because we were talking to them a lot and they were playing Christmas carols and festive music and that sort of thing that we could listen to. There was plenty of chit chat going on. We roasted things and cooked

things under instructions and we had plenty of recipe books. We had mince pies and marzipan and all the other goodies that you would have. We laid out the table and we hand wrote beautiful menus and we'd actually tried to save up some wine for the occasion. Of course wine's likely to freeze when it gets very cold and so we'd put it up in the rafters, in the peak of the roof which was the warmest place around. It actually got jolly hot up there sometimes when the Rayburn was really blazing. But unfortunately when we went out on our field trips during the autumn, we had to leave the base and of course it cooled down very greatly, and when we came back and started warming the place up, the drip, drip, drip started from the rafters and all our wine had gone and formed a puddle on the floor. So we didn't have any wine at mid-winter. But we had an excellent meal and festivities went on through the day rather like Christmas. And we then tumbled into our bunks at the end of the day, and life went on.

[0:24:04] Lee: What about this hair cut?

Kistruck: The hair cut, yes. For me I suppose that was a bit of a personal thing that in my family the men do tend to go bald at a fairly early age. It hadn't happened to me yet, but I thought I would find out what I was going to look like when it did, so I decided I would shave all my hair off. So I got the lads to cut my hair first and off it came. Another of us, Mike, he also shaved all his hair off too. I don't know if it was just to keep me company but anyway, so there were two naked skulls around for a while. It was quite frightening, but at least I got to know what I would look like in older age. I did it again the second year as well. It wasn't an uncommon thing. Fids quite often seem to do that at mid-winter. Don't ask me why; it's just one of the things that people seem to do. For me it seemed to be a good idea at the time and so I did it.

[0:25:01] Lee: I think we've covered everything else, just make sure I haven't missed anything. One thing I'd like you to do now if you wouldn't mind is give me your story of that Church Stretton event.

Kistruck: Yes at Church Stretton: That was one of the years when we went for Friday night as well as Saturday night. Hilary and I don't usually do that but that year we did. There were some people in the bar on Friday night; a few of the Fids turn up early with their wives and partners, and talk went on about the Antarctic the way it always does. That's why we have the reunion after all; it's so that we can do that without baffling people that we're speaking to. The idea came up that yes, wouldn't it be nice to go back again and following on from that, well if we did do that, at least it would have the advantage that our wives and loved ones would at last see the place that we keep clapping on about at such great lengths whenever

we get together. So it did seem to be a good idea and such an obvious one that the only reason why it doesn't happen is because nobody makes it happen. So we decided, well OK let's see if we can make it happen, and did a poll of hands at dinner on the Saturday night having described what the proposition was and it was pretty enthusiastically received, it looked as if it would go and so we made it go in the end.

[0:26:27] Lee: Isn't there a story about it snowing that weekend?

Kistruck: Yes Church Stretton was very snow bound that weekend and people were getting stuck in the car park and that kind of thing. I don't know whether that had anything to do with the desire to go down and see the real thing or not. It was just one of those coincidences.

[0:26:46] Lee: I'm going to have to put words in your mouth I think. I heard that it was so icy you actually had difficulty; all these Antarctic explorers couldn't get their cars out the car park. Is that true?

Kistruck: Yes, that's right.

[0:26:55] Lee: Could you say that for me?

Kistruck: Yes, in the morning at Church Stretton it was unusual that year, that we had a lot of snow during the reunion, and so much snow in fact that all these hardened Antarctic explorers did have to think about how to get their cars out of the car park in the morning. And some of them had great difficulty doing so [laughs]

[0:27:20] Lee: Brilliant. Is there anything else that you want to tell me about?

Kistruck: Laundry and washing. People often ask 'how did you do that down in Fossil Bluff?' and I suppose the simple answer is very infrequently. In terms of personal washing, well yes, you washed yourself when you thought you needed to; hands and face quite frequently, the rest of you much less often. Laundry, we used to just boil all our clothes up in a huge stewing pan. It was a marmalade or jam making stew pan. And we used to boil our clothes up in that with some detergent and poke them with a wooden spoon just to get them clean that way. As you can imagine that didn't do woollen clothes a great deal of good. So that's why it was good to go to a bigger base in the summer time and clean up.

[0:28:09] Lee: It would be fun if you could say ‘but of course being the Antarctic we didn’t hang them outside on the washing line to dry’.

Kistruck: Since it was very cold outside you couldn’t usually hang your clothes out there to dry off either and this was a big disincentive to washing them in fact, because when you’d done that you had to hang them around from the rafters inside the house, and the other people didn’t like that too much. Why should they be dodging your wet dripping clothes all the time? So that was a disincentive. So you’d learnt the trick of wearing two layers of clothing, and when the outside layer got dirty you just put the inside layer on instead so you always had a cleaner layer to put somewhere or other [laughs]. In terms of personal washing, second year Malky built a shower bath for us, so we just used to put a drum of hot water up in the rafters with a shower rose attached to it, and stand in a sawn off oil drum at the bottom with a piece of plastic sheeting around you. Five gallons of warm water out of the Rayburn was enough for a decent shower actually. It was a major contribution to civilisation we thought.

[0:29:15] Lee: So tell me about the décor?

Kistruck: The décor. The key thing about the décor was what sort of pictures did we put on the wall? Four blokes in a little hut, of course you can imagine, to begin with at least we put up pictures of pretty girls wearing not too many clothes, or maybe even none at all. But the amazing thing was we got fed up with that and by the end of two years the sort of things we had on the walls was what we really could find no substitute for at all, which was fried eggs, fresh fried egg, a tomato, fresh oranges, fresh fruit! I have photographs taken inside the building which verify this. There we are; picture of a nice freshly sliced orange there on the wall with ‘A real orange!’ written up against it.

[0:30:02] Lee: Brilliant. And tell me about Neil Armstrong?

Kistruck: Well Neil Armstrong we didn’t really know too much about because we were detached from news out there. I always do remember the Adelaide radio operator telling us one night that he could hear those guys on the moon better than he could hear us. It was quite humiliating [laughs].

[0:30:22] Lee: If you just could help me get into the story ‘I was there in 1969 and...’

Kistruck: I was there in 1969 and of course you’re completely detached from world news very largely in those days. So we never knew much about the Americans landing on the moon and Neil Armstrong’s famous comments. But I do remember the Adelaide radio operator telling us one night that he

could hear the Americans on the moon more clearly than he could hear us
250 miles away.

[0:30:55]

<ENDS>

Possible Extracts:

- Description of Marguerite Bay [0:00:58]
- Description of Fossil Bluff [0:03:01]
- Was there any privacy at Fossil Bluff? [0:09:20]
- The operation [0:12:59]
- Christmas in Antarctica [0:16:40]
- Alcohol rations [0:18:40]
- The mid-winter celebrations [0:21:21]
- The idea of the return trip to Antarctica conceived at Church Stretton [0:25:01]
- How did you do laundry at Fossil Bluff? [0:27:20]
- Neil Armstrong [0:30:02]