

Dog talk. Conversations with Ben Hodges: and John Sweeny, two dog handlers with the British Antarctic Survey 1961/3 & 1991/4.

Edited transcript of a recording by John Tolson, compiled from interviews he had at Rothera Station in 1993 with Ben Hodges and John Sweeny. BAS Archives Ref AD6/24/3/13.2.

Transcribed by Joanna Rae, 27 March 2022.

Transcriber's notes

There is a lot of background hum on the audio.

Ben and John use 'and' and 'so' as linking words – I have excluded many occurrences.

'You know' and 'I mean' are also common filler phrases, which I have often excluded.

I have used ... to indicate longer hesitations or a few disjointed words as a speaker gets his thoughts together.

Superscript numbers refer to explanatory notes at the end of the transcript.

Edited transcript

[00:00:00] Tolson: In early 1993 John Tolson spent six weeks at the last Antarctic base to operate dogs. He met up with two drivers, one young, the other older.

[00:00:12] Hodges: What about Blackie? That's Blackie. He'll have something to say, but not today. Hey, Blackie, what is it? Not even standing up, are you? Eh? Now there's the leader, that's Wendy, just having a little word. [Dogs barking]

[00:00:36] Tolson: Well, I'm standing amongst the last remaining Antarctic sledge dogs at Rothera, a British Antarctic Survey base on the coast of Adelaide Island just a few miles from the Antarctic continent. I'm joined by a veteran dog handler of the 1960s, Ben Hodges, who covered literally thousands of miles working with dogs at the old Stonington Base in Marguerite Bay, some hundred miles south of Rothera. And John Sweeny, one of the younger generation of Antarctic dog handlers but, sadly, the last.

[00:01:14] The British Antarctic Survey's involvement with dogs goes back to 1943, when Operation Tabarin, the Survey's forerunner, was formed in great secrecy. Initially two bases were created then, but in 1945 Hope Bay was built. Dogs were introduced from Greenland to establish a major sledging station until its closure in 1964. At that time dog travel was more reliable as a means of transport over ice. Vehicles and aircraft were in their infancy, so the geologists and map makers relied heavily on the dog teams and their handlers. Now, international rulings governing dogs in Antarctica have agreed that by April 1994 all dogs are to be removed from the Antarctic continent, so the last 19 dogs have just months in which to enjoy the freedom and life style that they and generations before them have known.

[00:02:18] Ben has returned to Antarctica after an absence of thirty years but his feelings run just as vividly as the sad day he left in 1963.

[00:02:28] Hodges: I would never have thought I'd be back in the Antarctic with huskies again. That part of being at Rothera is, well, it's really beyond what I ever dreamt possible. Rothera itself is a fine, exciting base but the dogs for me are a real bonus. ... Their reaction to you when you go down to the spans to visit them is just the same as I remember it being in the early '60s. The welcome that you get – a tremendous welcome, it's as though you've just been away for a week or two. You know, you go down to the spans and they're all bouncing around all eager and it shows in their eyes, and it's exactly the same as it was all those years ago. They're identical dogs, the only difference is they're not my team.

[00:03:24] Tolson: One of the main changes is the working of the dogs. Today they are unquestionably a luxury. The equivalent to the original dog handler is the GA or General Assistant. Now he, or she, is a highly trained mountaineer, well versed in crevasse rescue and survival techniques. They drive great distances on skidoos, delivered far into the interior by ski-equipped aircraft. Their job is just the same as it always was – keeping the scientist out of holes or, where required, putting him or her down them, yet it is hard to imagine developing a bond with a 600cc noisy machine. With a boisterous team of dogs it was altogether another matter.

[00:04:13] Hodges: Then ... you had a team if you were a GA dog driver, general assistant dog driver, then that team would be yours for your duration and no other driver would take that team, that would be yours. So you'd strive to go out every day, if possible, knowing that you weren't going to get every day because of bad weather and whatever, being busy somewhere else. But you tried to get out as often as possible and the relationship between you and the dogs was extremely strong. ... You'd spend many, many hours and many, many miles behind the dogs and you almost knew when one might be wanting to cause a bit of trouble, wanting to keep looking round back at the dog behind and you think 'Oh, Gino's going to bounce on to Aramie [?]' and you could nip it in the bud. And the dogs responded extremely well to the lightest of commands once you had control of the team, which, when you have it – a team – for 1 year, 2 years, that control comes. There are various methods of getting this control, I suppose, but once they know that you are in charge it makes a happy unit, you and the dogs.

[00:05:27] Tolson: That feeling has far from vanished today and John Sweeny, responsible for the Rothera dogs, shares Ben's view.

[00:05:34] Sweeny: The whole experience of dog driving is enjoyable, but once you've attained your position as the team driver - and basically with the BAS system of dogs it means that you are the substitute king dog and the dogs will obey you - once you've established the relationships between the dogs and yourself, life becomes so easy and enjoyable because the dogs pick up the slightest inclination, or change of mood, that you have and they'll react to that. The dogs behave well when they know what the proper system is for operating, they work well. And I think, probably, in contrast to summer travel, to be out in Antarctica, travelling by pure animal power, be it man-hauling or with dogs, and not having to use combustion engines, skidoos and all the noise and racket associated with that, it just allows you to get that much closer to nature. It's very hard to isolate what it is about dog driving, it's just the challenge of running the dogs, the enjoyment of being out there with 10 lively fellow animals, being closer to nature, it's just a combination of all these things. It has its bad days as well. The dogs occasionally fight and occasionally have injuries and one of the lead dogs might go on heat, whatever, and its ups and downs but the ups are really good and they're very rewarding.

[00:07:23] Tolson: Although the dogs no longer perform a vital working role, they are treated as man's best friend and I asked John if handling methods had changed much over the years.

[00:07:34] Sweeny: The lessons learnt on Operation Tabarin and successively every season, when the teams of dogs, which, unusually for most expeditions, were handed on year after year from driver to driver, the lessons learnt there in the hand-over of a team of dogs are applicable today just as they were 50 years ago when BAS first brought dogs down here as the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, so, with regards to the relationship between man and dog nothing has changed and the way of driving dogs now is exactly the same as it was 50 years ago and probably a 100 years ago.

[00:08:14] Tolson: As the need for dogs diminished in the mid-1970s, with more reliable vehicles and greater distances being covered, so too did the skill in dog training. However, it is individuals like John Sweeny who grasped the challenge and, where the opportunity to learn directly from someone else's experience occurs, they could capitalise on it.

[00:08:37] Sweeny: Ben came down last year and last year I was just taking over the Admirals as the new driver. There wasn't an awful lot of enthusiasm the previous year for running that particular team because there was five young dogs and 5 old dogs and they didn't really match too well. So I was faced with the up-hill task of welding the team together and training them to run as a team, but Ben was able to guide me. Through the winter I was in contact with Ben via air letters and faxes and he was always interested in the dogs and always able to give good advice, and the most important advice being perseverance, to keep at it and at it and keep working at it, which is something that nowadays we're not inclined to do. Modern man wants to see results pretty quickly and dogs don't produce results very quickly. It's over a period of time that you achieve your results and it's something that takes perseverance. If it wasn't for someone like Ben being down here to say 'Yes, it's going to be hard. Yes, you're going to have fights, fights and more fights but eventually they'll get to know you and you'll get to know them and things will even out and you'll have a good team'. And so it's happened.

[00:09:55] Tolson: It's not everyone today that harbours a strong feeling to work with the dogs, but nor was it the case in the time of large dog teams.

[00:10:03] Hodges: Drivers were allocated to teams if they accepted a team. ... I don't think anyone was a dog hater, but not everyone wanted ... It's quite tough, driving a dog team. You have to maintain discipline, you have to exercise them regularly, it can be a very cold, tough job, there's a lot of shouting to do sometimes. Not everyone wanted anything to do with the dogs really. In fact some guys never wanted to go out with them at all, it just was too much hassle.

[00:10:37] Tolson: And yet there must be a great feeling of achievement when, after weeks of frustrated training, the dogs began to respond. The handler has, at last, brought together that bond of respect needed before a team becomes a team.

[00:10:55] Sweeny: Yes, it's taking five old dogs and integrating five young dogs into that old team and producing the strongest team on base now, and a team that has a hell of a lot of potential for the next year or two until the old boys start to drop out due to old age. We've got, as I say, five dogs which are – four dogs approaching eight years old, in fact they're

eight today, it's their birthday today, we've got one dog who's five years old, and then there's five dogs who are three years old. So those five dogs are the basis for the team in the future but, because we don't have a breeding programme, the team will decline in strength as the old boys have to retire due to arthritis and just generally slowing down due to old age.

[00:11:46] Tolson: But beyond the team, what is the great quality of the lead dog? He or she is out at the front, leading the other dogs. Ben and John both agree on the single most important skill that a dog must show to gain this pride of place.

[00:12:01] Hodges: Well, in the real dog days, when the dogs were working units, getting results out in the field, the drivers that came in – I, myself - was fortunate to inherit a team from the previous year – it could be a good team, it could be a bad team. But what you need in a lead dog, the dog must want to stay up front ahead of the other dogs. Some dogs just don't know what to do when they're out in front. If you can get a dog to stay in front of the others, and you can often prove this by being in a following team, if you're following team dogs love to follow but not all dogs will stay up front. If you find one that will stay up front and you think he's reasonably intelligent, looks intelligent or whatever, you can then try him with the commands, with the 'Irra' and the 'Awk', left and right. I trained a second leader ... one I knew would stay up front because I tried him, that's a requirement – they have to be keen enough to pull ahead of all the other dogs, some will and some won't – and I thought 'I think he's bright enough' and I taught him the commands and I finished up with two very good leaders in the team.

[00:13:15] Sweeny: Intelligence is one quality you look for in a lead dog, but more importantly, you need the ability of the dog to lead out, to want to go places. It's all very well if they're intelligent and know to turn left or right, but if they don't want to go forward, if they're not always pushing out ahead, you've got a bit of a struggle there. So, yeah, initially, just the urge to go forward is the most important thing. Once you've got that sorted out, and once the dog understands that that is what you want it to do, unless you tell it otherwise, you can work on that basis and teach the dog left and right. Once again, it's time consuming and results don't happen overnight or anything like that, but in the long term it's fantastically rewarding to get an animal to understand what you're saying and to react.

[00:14:10] Tolson: In the early days of dog travel, the journeys were long and arduous ones. As the only means of transport for the geologists and surveyors, it also meant that there needed to be a great number of dogs on a base.

[00:14:22] Hodges: Yes, I was amazed to find out that ... towards the late '70s, I think in one year, there was about 140 dogs including the pups. They had 10 9-dog teams and spares as well. You know, the spares ones may have been old timers which were really retired and pups not yet ready to go in, but when I read that in later reports it was amazing. I remember seeing one figure, one year, collectively, I don't know which year it was now, around 1970ish, the teams between them that season had done 23,000 miles of actual productive work, travel in the field. That was the problem, was beginning to be the problem in the early '60s, the working areas were getting so far away from base that they started to introduce single engine aeroplanes, single engine Otters, as early as 1959/60, a little bit unreliable because it was still in its infancy, and rudimentary over-snow transport. You could, on a survey, be up to 400 miles actually away from base with the teams. I think I talked about this before ... I did one journey of just under a thousand miles, it was, and lasting sixteen and a half weeks.

[00:15:49] Tolson: With so many miles covered, every driver must have had a horror story to tell and Ben was certainly no exception.

[00:15:57] Hodges: Oh, yes, there's always one. There are quite a few. My biggest one was on my last journey before I was due to leave Antarctica. It was to be the last day of my biggest journey, you know, the big one of approaching a thousand miles in 4 months. I was leading that day, and we were descending from the plateau of the Graham Land peninsula down to sea level. We could have done that in the one day quite easily with good conditions and no hiccups. It was my turn to lead that day, a tricky descent, there were three teams – I think there were five of us and three dog teams – I can't remember if there were six of us and three dog teams, certainly three dog teams and either five or six men - and myself and my co-driver, well, passenger, I suppose, rather than co-driver because he didn't drive, we descended from the plateau – a very quick descent where we had to use rope brakes to control it, and then you had to take a big, wide traverse round a big bowl which we call The Amphitheatre, which was heavily crevassed. It was the time of year when all the crevasses were bridged, except the huge ones – some of them were open, but they were no problem because you could see them.

[00:17:23] So we descended, got the rope brakes off and started along the traverse, traversing round and the sledge was sliding slightly downhill below the line the dogs were pulling in, because it sloped quite steeply, even though we had keels down. All of a sudden, my leader, Dot, she plopped through, just disappeared, which wasn't uncommon – happened regularly – but straight away the second pair, they went straight through again, and then with the weight of those three, it just dragged the others down in turn. The whole team disappeared zip, zip, zip just like that, just before my eyes. The sledge had slid downhill and the front of the sledge, the cow catcher, was over the edge of this big crevasse. What we were doing, and I didn't realise, we'd been travelling along the snow bridge, but fortunately the sledge was below it, and all the dogs had disappeared, so we quickly turned the sledge over on its side. I crawled to the edge and I looked down this thing, and I couldn't see any bottom because it went down into gloom, and I could see all the dogs just hanging, swinging in their harnesses, still attached, still there – none had dropped out at that stage.

[00:18:39] One of the other teams was coming along behind me, it was there within a few minutes. I motioned him to come from above my line of travel, to picket his team, empty his sledge and push the sledge downhill over the crevasse because the width of the gap, the hole was only about four feet, although I remember the crevasse itself being a lot wider. They are never quite regular and it was a lot wider and it was corniced at the top, quite strongly corniced, so ... the only one way to get them out was to go down on a rope to get them out singly. We pushed his empty sledge down from the uphill side of the crevasse down towards us on the downhill side, picketed the sledge. In the meantime, I'd been getting a rope off mine. I put some crampons on and I got myself into the rope, but not very professionally, I decided that I'd stand in two loops and have a chest-loop on my chest with a carabiner tightly to my chest, so that the rope went through the carabiner, I could rest my arms and stand in the loops.

[00:19:55] They lowered me down with a couple of round-turns round the sledge and I went down to each dog in turn. First the pairs. As I got down to a pair, they send me a rope down and I'd tie it on to the harness, unclip him from the trace and they'd pull them up one at a time. But in the meantime, two of the dogs had been fighting in mid-air, they were swinging around and they'd dropped out – I thought they'd gone 'cos I couldn't see them ... it was

Aramis and Eccles – I thought they'd gone. When I got down to Dot – she was the leader, she was the furthest down, first to fall and last to be rescued – she was the furthest down, she be maybe 40-50 feet down, the full length of the trace. I looked down, my eyes had got accustomed to the gloom, and there was a big block of ice, with snow on it, wedged directly below the team, and it was another 20-30 feet below and I could see the two dogs lying still on the ice and I thought 'Well, at least they're there, but they're not moving'. So I got Dot away and said 'Just keep me going down', so I went down and they were both ok. Both lying quiet, a bit bloody, they were, because they'd been fighting. They sent me a rope down and we pulled the last two out.

[00:21:10] Tolson: John is thankful not to have experienced such situations, but he is well aware, through reading diaries and reports of earlier expeditions, just how attitudes towards the dogs had affected those expeditions' progress.

[00:21:25] Sweeny: The annals of polar exploration, and in particular Antarctic exploration, have intertwined with dog travel. No matter which sort of classic books you read, be it Amundsen and Scott, Mawson, Shackleton, the list goes on, no matter which of those books you read, you'll come across the experiences of dog driving there, be it positive or negative. In the case of Scott it was mostly negative, but in the case of Amundsen and of Mawson it was mostly positive. I enjoy reading Amundsen's account of the dogs because he was totally dependent on the dogs. His whole plan revolved around the efficient running and the general health of the dogs, and as such, as a potential or a budding dog driver, you merely have to open his book to read how it should be done and how you must treat the dogs. One particular quote in his book is that dogs, huskies, aren't pets, each of them is an individual character and you must treat them as being at least as intelligent as yourself. Which is quite good because they all are characters. It's a little bit hard when you come down here to realise that we've got 19 dogs on the span now and every dog is different, no two dogs are the same and the interaction between each and every dog must be understood by a driver and handler before he'll get the best out of the team. So with Amundsen using over 100 dogs on his trip, the importance of the psychology of dog driving was essential.

[00:23:13] Tolson: There was no getting away from it, dogs were, and remain, hard work to operate. Nine individual characters trying to outwit you, when working sledges had, at the end of the day, to be fed. The method in the field was cleaner and simpler than on base, where weak stomachs could be turned forever.

[00:23:31] Sweeny: The feeding regime down here is probably unusual in that the dogs are fed every second day. The quantities of feed are approximately 4-5 pounds of seal meat per feed, which is every second day. That's while the dogs are on base. Now, the taking of seals is obviously a contentious issue but we never take any more than we absolutely need. We keep a stock pile of may be three months' worth of dog feed, which would equate to maybe 20 seals and we maintain that stockpile here. The seals, obviously, have to be prepared before feeding and it's quite a messy job but usually everyone on base gets involved in that. Some people won't because they object to the whole system down here, but if you are to take part in running the dogs, it's a necessary evil. It's got to be done. Some countries have used imported foodstuffs. They've brought in, maybe, cattle carcasses or horse, sheep or whatever but the quality of feed isn't as high as seal feed. One of the most important things with the seal meat is that during the winter, with temperatures dropping to minus 30s and lower down here, the dogs need quite a considerable amount of fat and there isn't too many carcasses that

you'll get enough fat on for the dogs, so we do feed quite a bit of blubber during the winter to the dogs.

[00:25:20] Tolson: Whereas, in the field, feeding was comparatively simple. Not a single lump of seal meat was to be found anywhere.

[00:25:28] Hodges: There's a concentrated diet, it's ... just a block of dog pemmican, just like we used to eat, I suppose, with a lot more fat in it. A small block of about 4 or 5 inches square, about an inch thick. We used to feed them on a ratio of 1:1:2, one one day, one the next day, two the next, constantly, and then if you got to a depot you'd give them a bit extra. But it always seemed adequate, the dogs seemed to work hard for many, many weeks just on that. There would be no seal, just that diet. They'd get very fit, very lean. We used to weigh them when they came back.

[00:26:11] Tolson: I expect you got fit and lean, didn't you!

[00:26:15] Hodges: We did! Yeah, it's true, I can think of days of 20, 30, up to 40 miles, day after day skiing behind the sledge. You never rode, you always had fairly big loads, you would never ride - either ski or you would run. If it was downhill you might have to check the sledge with the brakes, so you'd ride then. But yes, we got very fit.

[00:26:45] Tolson: A team of nine dogs generally pulled a loaded sledge weighing around 500 pounds. The more widely used method of attaching the dogs to the sledge is called the centre trace system. Here, pairs of dogs, behind one another, with the lead dog out at the front, pull the load. The other method is the fan trace, but here Ben and John are not in total agreement.

[00:27:10] Sweeny: Well, this year we had the opportunity, with good sea ice, to use the fan trace and it is a really rewarding way of running the dogs. The dogs assume the formation of a wolf pack, almost, with usually the leader being slightly in front and then the other dogs forming a sort of arrowhead formation and falling back on either flank. It's not, supposedly, as efficient as the centre line trace, which we usually used for travel with the full team but with five or six dogs the fan trace is a fantastic system. On sea ice, where you're not going to encounter crevassing or where you're not going to encounter too many large obstacles to travel, it really is a good system, and these dogs here seem to adapt to it very well. It's been quite a long time since anyone's used the fan trace down here but I found that the five younger dogs adapted to the system very quickly. The essence with fan trace is that each dog must maintain his position within the trace and he must be happy running in that position, be it left of the leader or right of the leader, or on the flanks.

[00:28:27] Hodges: We used to talk about this for hours and I think they still do. That's the centre trace over the fan trace. Well, I was always a centre trace man. I tried the fan and, for me, it wasn't a very effective power unit. The idea of the fan, that each dog has his own space to run around in, so that when it's fast, when conditions are very good, they are not in each other's way, they can spread out. And when conditions are very poor, say soft, deep snow, the idea is that they are all supposed to pull together and pull close, but I never found that happened. Whereas, in the centre trace method, which is one long line with, say, four pairs and a leader, on a trace may be two feet long, if people still remember feet, two feet long that makes a nice, very tight unit where, more or less, you've got two lines in the snow, very close

together. I always thought – well, I’m convinced - that that makes a more effective power unit, so I was always a centre trace man, without a doubt.

[00:29:30] Tolson: Nevertheless, Ben found that a working day in the ‘60s was long, tiring but always rewarding.

[00:29:38] Hodges: The routine in the field, if you were in the area where you were going to work, you would be close to the outcrops, say, where the geologist wanted to work, you’d pitch camp, say, within a few miles of two or three little outcrops where you wanted to visit. You would visit those during the day. ... We would take just an empty sledge if the weather looked good, and you’d just take them along there. You might not even take the whole team, just put five on. Just nip along there ... picket the dogs and stay there with them and work. If you were travelling to an area, let’s say if you had a hundred miles to go to an area, and depending on the terrain, you can cover up to 40 or 50 miles a day or you might be just doing five miles a day if the snow conditions are bad and the terrain’s dangerous.

[00:30:25] If the weather was good, you’d break camp in the morning, reasonable time – I don’t know, seven, eight o’clock or whatever – have breakfast with porridge or a couple of cups of tea, pack all your sleeping gear up, roll up your sleeping bag and your sheepskin, into the bag, close all the pots and pans box, the food box, get them all outside, groundsheet out, pegs out, tent down, load the sledge, and then finally put the harnesses on the dogs, hitch the dogs on to the trace, make sure your partner’s ready and away you would go. You got very efficient if you’re doing it day after day.

[00:31:07] Tolson: Man’s best friend, perhaps, but amongst themselves they were often vicious adversaries. Fights to the death were not uncommon and the handler would have to try to prise apart two forty kilo dogs as quickly as possible.

[00:31:23] Hodges: It’s quite a fearsome thing for a complete stranger to suddenly see - because they are big animals and they sound extremely fierce when they are fighting, there’s a lot of noise and a lot of teeth bared, often quite a bit of blood flowing. It is quite a frightening thing. But you have to get them apart as quickly as you can, you have to get them apart to save them injuring each other. At any time that’s important but in the old days it was part of your power unit, you know. I’d have to shoot the dog if it was badly injured or you’d carry the dog, so you’re carrying an extra 80, 90, 100 pounds and you’re 80, 90, 100 pounds pulling-power less. So the object was to get them apart as quickly as possible.

[00:32:14] Tolson: And how would you have to do that, sometimes?

[00:32:16] Hodges: Well, we always used what was called a rope thumper. It was just a piece of, may be, one inch diameter rope back-spliced into itself and if a fight started – it’s not just a case of one dog fighting another, you could get three dogs gang up on one, and that poor old dog can really be suffering, he could be lamed or, well, killed – so the thing to do is get straight in amongst them. I – all the drivers – used to aim the blows at the ones that had their teeth sunk in, around the snout. That saves you wading in with boots, the first thing you can pick up, ice axes or whatever, which has been known, and you can’t aim blows like that, you can do a lot more damage. There are theories that if you go down and bit ears and things like that, you know, and picking dogs up and shaking them – I don’t think I was ever strong enough to do that, to be honest – two 90, 100 pound dogs fighting. I certainly wouldn’t go down anywhere near with my face. Lots and lots of drivers have been nipped, by accident,

and it's a fearsome power in the jaws, they could do awful damage. Some sort out their own differences but you have to look after the poor dog that's copping it, it's not always just one that will tackle another, it might be two or three that jump on him and that can have nasty consequences. But generally, when they are working regularly, they're ok. When you set off in the morning, and they are establishing 'Look, I'm boss and I'm going in front of you' and all this bit – but once you got going, everything's fine.

[00:33:58] Tolson: And when the team was running smoothly, hundreds of miles from base, the landscape and isolation held a special magic, hard to explain.

[00:34:09] Hodges: Oh, dear me, that's a tricky one, isn't it? ... Well, it's quite a rare thing. I know there are four operators running little dog trips here, there and everywhere now but to be isolated, to be cut off ... two teams and four chaps, or three teams and four or five chaps, it's a good feeling. To feel as though, in Tilman's words¹, 'If you get yourself into trouble, you get yourself out of trouble'. There is a ... macho bit in it, you can do anything - when you're young enough, you can conquer the world – and all this romantic twaddle, but it's good, I can't say any more than that. The isolation is tough, and you're managing it, you're enjoying it. There's a good element of danger, which always spices things up a bit, but if you feel as though you're doing things safely, you feel as though everything's going to be alright. The isolation; the beauty of the place; when the weather does its stuff, it's quite awesome, the tent blowing and rattling and the dogs all curled up - all nice and quiet - and then the storm stops, you open the tent door and look out and it's a beautiful day, and you see all the crevasses you've got to cross. [laughs]

[00:35:45] Tolson: What about your longest lie-ups? Have you had some good, long lie-ups when you haven't been able to travel?

[00:35:48] Hodges: Yes, the lie ups seem to be just the same these days as they were then. Anything up to a week, yeah, you've got to be prepared for that. The wind can blow for a week or ... the surfaces can be so bad that it's not even worth relaying, you just have to wait for things to harden up or blow the soft stuff away, or just generally wait for weather. The odd lie-up's great, when you've been working and travelling, there's nothing nicer than hearing the tent blowing in the morning and knowing it's straight back into bed, that's great. But too long is awful.

[00:36:25] Tolson: And yet, in 1963, Ben saw the writing on the wall for the dogs. In the archives at Rothera, he showed me the original telex sent from London Office, explaining the future of the dogs. Even thirty years ago it was thought that, on a practical level, dogs had a limited life-time left. However, on the emotional level, they've survived until the present. They will be gone by April 1994 and I asked John about his feelings.

[00:36:59] Sweeny: It's very sad for the people who have known the dogs, and especially for the people who have worked with the dogs and they have certainly contributed an awful lot to the atmosphere here at Rothera, particularly during the winter. It is inevitable that, when you stop a breeding programme, it's only a matter of time before the dogs are going to die out. I think most people at Rothera, and in BAS as a whole, would rather see the dogs die out gradually here over a period of maybe five or six years at the most and so that would end the era of dog travel in the Antarctic. At the moment it looks like BAS might be forced to remove the dogs next year to comply with the Antarctic Treaty and there's a great deal of emotion as to what exactly what's going to happen: whether the dogs are going to be put down here or

whether they'll be shipped out, and where they'll be shipped out to. I feel it is inevitable that, when Britain signs an Antarctic Treaty, it must comply with that Treaty. It's a little bit sad that this issue has become so contentious and that people are getting upset about it, but it's life.

[00:38:17] Tolson: And yet after all those years, Ben remembers his favourite dog, a bitch called Dot.

[00:38:25] Hodges: Well, I think if I had to pick one then it would be my leader, it would be Dot. And the next one, very close, would be her brother, a dog called Harvey, who was almost twice as heavy as Dot, a tremendous powerhouse in the team.

[00:38:40] Tolson: There may well be a final, ultimate, joyful exit, one that will help us all to remember the dogs, but as Ben leaves in 1993, uncertain if he will be back next season, memories come flooding back.

[00:38:57] Hodges: I'm not a field guy anymore, I'm afraid. I have to settle for work on base. I see all the field parties coming back and I feel quite unsettled, you can't really share that aspect of it anymore. ... Whether I shall ever be back at Rothera, I don't know. Almost certainly, if I don't come back next season, it seems that the dogs will have probably gone to whichever home they're going to go to, so this could be my last season with what, for me, the highlight of this base, is of course the dogs, even though the base is very exciting, it is the dogs, I suppose, and they won't be here any longer.

[00:39:46] ENDS

Notes

1. Tilman: probably a reference to Major Harold William Tilman, CBE, DSO, MC and Bar, (14 February 1898 – November 1977), an English mountaineer and explorer, renowned for his Himalayan climbs and sailing voyages. (Wikipedia, accessed 26 Mar 2022).