

RAYMOND CANNON

Edited transcript of interview with Raymond Cannon, conducted by Japp Verdenius in 1993. BAS archives AD6/24/3/17. Transcribed by Allan Wearden, January 2021.

[0:00:00] Verdenius: How did you get along, scientists and non-scientists?

Cannon: We, we certainly didn't have that division, [coughs]. Excuse me!

[0:00:11] Verdenius: Yet there was a division?

Cannon: In the late yes, that's true but I found that the friends that I made or the people that I was closest to were not necessary scientists I really, certainly on our base when we were there, there was really not a division between sort of scientists and support staff, certainly I didn't feel it. And so I got on very well and yes I guess you're right that perhaps the support staff as they were called probably had more calls on their time around the base; they had a lot of activities that other people relied on, for example the boatman, obviously people relied on him to ferry them somewhere to go diving or whatever so he probably had less freedom than I had working by myself. So yes maybe I wasn't so aware of that that's true, but no so like one of my good friends was the boatman but I also had good friends who were scientists and who went back to Cambridge with me and we worked together, whereas some of the other people went off and you only saw occasionally after that, after we'd come back from the Antarctic.

[0:01:41] Verdenius: What did you do in your spare/free time?

Cannon: Well an awful lot of things and it depended on what time of year. One of the things I liked to do and probably did more than anybody who was on the base with me, was walking. I really liked walking, no necessary long expeditions but every day I would try and walk somewhere and so even if I was working in the base doing experiments I would go for a long walk after lunch maybe, over to the cove to look at the elephant seals or maybe up to the little observation peak, just to look around and see what was happening with the wildlife with the weather, and I tried to do that every day, so that there was always a contrast and it's always different. One day you'll see something you've never seen before, or the weather is always different, or the conditions underfoot are always different, so for me that became a very important time of the day, a sort of taking in the environment if you like! And then all the other things like photography was very important, taking pictures but also developing them and showing them [phone rings, say excuse me I'll just deal with that actually]. [After call] So were we doing things?

[0:03: 42] Verdenius: One thing, how big is Signy Island?

Cannon: It's a very small island, I forget exactly it's something like by seven by five kilometres something like that which sounds very tiny but it's very up and down, very rugged. There's an ice cap on it on top, a small cap on it rises to about 1000ft, and really I think it's a sort of ideal size. It takes quite a few hours to walk the length of it, there are about three huts where it's possible to stay, field huts, and that was something I really liked to

do which was to stay in field huts. So to travel over to a field hut either for a day, perhaps as part of your work, but also as a holiday just to get away - whenever I tell people that they think that's very strange that you should be living somewhere in the middle of Antarctic and then you want to get away. But I think most people found it was quite nice to take themselves out of the base atmosphere to get away from 11 other people in the winter, have some time by yourself just to relax and read, listen to the sounds of the Antarctic. I liked that very much I used to do that fairly often and that's one of the memories I have, I guess one of the best memories of doing that. What else did we do? Skiing after a fashion, don't think we were very good but we did it, and motorised toboggan skidoos, some people used more than others, I was a bit of a purist I liked to walk! Rather than they weren't really terribly necessary just for walking but they were necessary for transporting equipment.

[0:05:47] Verdenius: Walking for one hour a day for one year and a half?

Cannon: Oh that would be a short walk, mostly I walked for longer than an hour, but yeah.

[0:06:00] Verdenius: It must have taken you all over the island?

Cannon: No to...walk around the island would only take the best part of a day because it's very rugged up and down, very hard underfoot, takes quite a long time. If you walked round on the sea ice it probably wouldn't take so long, but for example people would generally walk somewhere like the north end of the island or to the Gurlay Peninsula where there were lots of seals and penguins, generally go to look at something like the blue eyed shag nests or look at penguin colonies or to look at seals in a part of the island where you wouldn't normally look at them. Or go to some cove and look at the elephant seals there and, yeah, it was, it seemed bigger than it was in a sense because of the terrain and I used to like to walk a couple of hours most days if I could. I used to do exercise, there was an exercise bike used to keep fit with doing exercises. We used to watch films, what else? Eat, [laughter] drink!

[0:07:34] Verdenius: Drink, talk?

Cannon: Yeah-yeah!

[0:07:37] Verdenius: What did you talk about, I mean there's no football matches or no world news?

Cannon: Oh no you did get some world news! Well I think it's a community of people with different interests and you talk about different things with different people depending on what their interests are. You talk a lot about what is going on immediately around you in the environment around you, people talked a lot about the wildlife. For example I can remember diesel mechanic was very fond of birds and coming in one day, very excited, saying the snow petrels had just had their chicks or something like that. So people were very aware of the wildlife and what stages it was going through, much more than you would be, I think, back in this country, unless you were naturalist that was doing that all the time. But the wildlife was so immediate around you and it was coming and going of course, so if penguins arrived back at the end of winter or seals arrived that was a talking point, people would say they'd seen a fur seal and the first one of the year or something like that at the beginning of the summer,

that sort of thing. People's experiences of doing work or walking around the island the sights they'd seen I think there was very focused on that, and people very aware of perhaps what was going on back home and people back in Cambridge, aware of the boat leaving, where the boat was at any given time, or where the ships were, the two BAS ships were, what they were doing, when they were going to arrive, that was an endless source of discussion. When the boat was going to arrive, who was on it, who was coming, what they were going to be doing, how many people there'd be on the base, how we'd all fit in, that sort of thing! Things that affected you and your life down there...people talked an awful lot about what they would do when they got back I think, as well or what I think people daydreamed a lot, maybe somebody like was going to buy a yacht and then they would spend hours thinking how big this yacht was looking at magazines to decide if they could afford a 20 foot yacht or a 30 foot yacht or something like that! Everyone sort of had their plan and also plans for travel on the way back, some people travelled in South America, spent a lot of time thinking about that talking about that, so yeah, looking to the future.

[0:10:58] Verdenius: When you said looking at the wildlife and did they also take penguin eggs, kill seals for the dogs like before?

Cannon: Well we didn't have dogs so the answer to both of those questions is no! No I think most people were very conscious of the fact that even despite the fact it was a conservation zone if you like people were just aware of the fact, the wildlife was there and we were just there temporarily, and I think everybody tried to minimize their impact on it so no, people wouldn't take eggs or something like that, unless it was part of a study. But then, ok, maybe you'd measure the eggs or weigh the penguins or so on, but I think as a scientist, there were scientists involved in experiments. For example it was unusual, I think there was one group studying muscle physiology or something, and they did actually have to over the course of the year take one or two penguins and that caused a lot of discussion and dissent on base, and I think a lot of the people weren't scientists used to give the scientists a very hard time for doing that. People even used to give me a hard time for killing mites, because looking at the physiology of the mites and so on. So I think a lot of people who went to the Antarctic, and I include myself, very keen that things stay the as they are there now as they have been, the impact is small, and there weren't any dogs on the island so that problem didn't arise of killing seals. For me, this is getting off the point really, one of the things that I have as an experience is the fact there is this wildlife down there now, have to think exactly what it's doing now but it's summer time but that there are seals lying on a beach in the Antarctic, elephant seals doing their elephant seal thing and with nothing to do with man, but man isn't part of that world and they may come and observe it now and again but I like that idea that there are places left in the world! There is wildlife going about its activities without hardly any impact of man, yeah that's important to me that feeling like there are places like that.

[0:14:27] Verdenius: Did you have that idea at time while you were there?

Cannon: I did actually that there are certain times when you may have been walking a long time in a certain frame of mind but I came remember being at one part of the island where there is a big cove, it was absolutely covered with elephant seals, large two or three ton

elephant seals, just stretched out on the beach scratching and mating, making a noise and so on, but just doing their thing, you felt quite privileged to be there just to watch that as an observer sort of thing with these large animals just going about their lives. And somehow or other that was separate and man was not affecting that life in any. Obviously more and more as we will as tourists go perhaps more people want to see sights like that and then it will necessary to manage it as best we can. But I like the idea of that natural life going on in an unspoiled way I guess...but one of the things about the Antarctic is that the wildlife there is very, (well let me qualify it), some animals are very...not easily disturbed by man in the sense that obviously in past people killed whales and seals and whatever, and obviously they very vulnerable in that sense, but I don't think penguins or elephant seals are particularly vulnerable to man coming along and taking a picture of them...people I mean. The habitat maybe vulnerable such as trampling over the ground, maybe that and certain species are, for example giant petrels, are very shy and any presence of people they will pull away from. And so certainly people will disturb certain species more than others, but I think because penguins and most of the large...sea birds and mammals that come on to the land have never experienced any land based predators like polar bears in the Arctic or something they're generally pretty oblivious to any two legged people walking up to them! They're pretty tolerant to that sort of thing, think people, most people, are surprised how, tame is the wrong word, how resistant they are to disturbance, but I don't want to underestimate the fact that some animals are.

[0:17:42] Verdenius: Patience of the people like at Signy helped?

Cannon: Well yes. I remember one winter when I was collecting rocks or something it was very cold day very misty and there were no penguins on the island at that time, they were away over wintering somewhere on the ice at sea. And this was one of the first penguins back and it saw me from the distance, you the only large upright creature presumably, thought it was another penguin and I think I also made a cry as well like a penguin [laughter]! And it came rushing up towards me and through the mist sort of thing obviously thinking, but it did come rushing up and then we are standing looking at each other and it thinking this is not a penguin! [Laughing] But there was nice interaction for me anyway.

[0:18:55] Verdenius: You tell me you have some diaries of the time you were there?

Cannon: Yeah, well (excuse my coughing), what I did was to write a continual letter which is for about 18 months' worth of experiences, not necessarily every day but probably on average every two or three days. And depending what mood I was in I would write more and it's really describing, it was written as a letter to my parents and sent, but I've obviously reclaimed it now! So it's talking about, for example it's quite exciting to have a ship calling. We've been totally isolated for nine months now, still I don't suppose it makes any notable difference, and so on. Then I would describe, try to write experiences of the scenery or something the wildlife life around the base...my experiences of cooking, watching fish and gulls, trips to field huts, activities on the base, experiences of how I was getting on with other people, my own state of mind and feeling very well despite having a backache! We had to do a lot of carrying of things-building a jetty, looking at films and reading books...just

everything work...just absolutely everything that I experienced in that time! Some of these things I have tried to write up so for example some things I have written up as...articles for this, a magazine...that I have tried to write the original work up in a little bit more worked way perhaps in the idea of a book or something, but as you can see are still, it hasn't written but!

[0:21:52] Verdenius: Did you write about walking?

Cannon: Yes, yes there is for example I was talking about the walk that I did most days which was up to a point called 'Obs', Observation Point which, do you want me to read it?

*'A stiff climb up the steep slope directly behind the base leads to a prominent headland called "Obs" short for Observation Bluffs, climbing up and over a saddle and on a bit more suddenly a magnificent view appears all the way across the sea to the eastern horizon. I don't think I could ever tire of this view which is always changing and different and this day the air was still and crisp and dark stratus clouds sitting low over the land completely obscuring the mountains of Coronation Island which lie to the north, a curtain of dark grey cloud hung down across the whole of that island revealing only a strip of land above the coastline the features of which were somehow accentuated by this highlighting. The ice cliffs of the Sunshine Glacier, so called because there's usually a patch of sunshine playing somewhere along its jagged surface where a band of pale blue above the intervening mass smooth grey black water...'*

So it goes on!

*'The slate like sea was given texture and shape by silent currents and by the occasional distant flock of seabirds stippling the surface while feeding on krill and other plankton away from the land, horizons became indistinct wispy band of cloud hung down lit up here and there by diffuse golden light where the early winter sun found a rare passage through the clouds these delicate tones blended sea and sky together like some primeval scene!'*

This...goes on for pages [laughter]! So what I was trying to do here was something which as a scientist I'm not very experienced at, but just to describe the scene, and also I've got...what it feels like for example to just experience the wildlife. So here I'm saying:

*'One of the joys of being on Signy Island in the summer, is being able to step outside and come across a great variety of species literally on your doorstep. For example standing on the wooden stairway outside one of the base buildings it's not at all unusual to see a Weddell seal lying on the beach, and a group of young male elephant seals playing in the surf, and a flock of sheathbills scampering about the rocks, also a solitary Dominican gull standing on a rock bellowing out a raucous trumpeting cry, as a subordinate gull flies overhead! And there are always penguins somewhere, it's rare not to be able to see one or more groups of penguins somewhere; along the shoreline penguins continuously emerge from the sea and waddle up the beach calling "Awak", to see if any other of their species are to be found in that particular spot.'*

And so on.

[0:25:40] Verdenius: That's a lot!

Cannon: Yeah, they seemed to be short sighted and rather prone to mistake humans for other penguins:

*'After returning from a fishing, or should I say krilling, trip they seemed to be more preoccupied with preening and resting and taking time out before making their way back to their partner, often by means of a laborious climb up and over an intervening hill to reach their colony. When penguins arrive back on Signy Island at the end of winter they are particular prone to exhibit this type of behaviour and their characteristic tracks are often to be found in the snow all the way up and over surprisingly high terrain it seems as though that once they emerge from the sea after a long and presumably hazardous journey there reluctant to re-enter it. One explanation for this phenomena is...'*

This gets technical here!

*'...the three dimensional underwater seascape of the aquatic penguin collapses down to one point of dimensional emergence and as such represents s the most risky element in the whole journey' It is quite common to see leopard seals lying in wait in the shallow waters for unwary or unlucky penguins! Much better therefore to endure the trek over the mountain or having to risk everything by having to return to the water. Penguins are thus are a common sight around the base picking their way carefully through the clutter of equipment and material that typically lies around the environment of an Antarctic station, one becomes almost blasé to the sight of a penguin jumping up on to a plank of wood carefully waddling along its length and launching itself off the other end with a big both feet together type of leap.'*

That's penguins! One of the other things I tried to write about was a group of birds that are Antarctic sheathbills or 'Mutts' - I don't know if you are familiar with them - and which really were quite a source of entertainment for people. These are scavenging, small white scavenging birds that feed on krill that the penguins drop, in fact they force the penguins to spill the krill whilst they are feeding their chicks. But they are also scavenging so they will hang around the base and will feed on any scraps or anything that is left over and they have a quite elaborate heirarchy and on Signy Island there's a roof which directly outside the kitchen and where people would throw scraps if there was anything left and the sheathbills or mutts had this pecking order which was very entertaining! And so there was this one bird, the most dominant bird, was called 'King Mutt,' and he had a ledge - in fact somebody at some stage built a little ledge for him to stand on! - and he was the king bird if you like, the 'King Mutt', and if any other bird alighted on his ledge, which was called 'The Throne', he would throw them off! And he literally would grab the other bird by the leg and threw them off the roof, and there were a few other birds tolerated lower down the slope of the roof and then most of the other birds would be scurrying on the ground below the roof and catching the scraps that rolled off the roof. And at some stage somebody had banded some of these birds although I think bands were removed at one stage, so it was possible to identify individuals and to recognize individuals and where they were in this pecking order if you like, and to throw

scraps and to watch what was happening, and they would hang around the base all winter because there were things to feed on which kept them there. And that was a sort of endless entertainment, and for example, I have tried to describe what that was like, because I think people identified very much with these birds who were wintering there as well if you like. But they were rather I think they're endearing because of their behaviour because you show a picture of them they just looks like a small fluffy pigeon shaped bird. But they are real characters in that they are fearless; if you lie down in the snow they all come up and start pecking you because they think you might be dead and they can eat you! [Laughter] Well that's natural scavenger behaviour of the bird, so they were very fearless and the colder it got the more fearless they got so just sit there puffed up to survive the cold. So I think most people got quite a lot of pleasure out of these birds who were there in the winter. And in the summer the same spot was occupied by a pair of [coughing - sorry my brain is gone, I'm doing too much talking-(laughter)]. Antarctic skuas, who were these large predatory gulls, brown skuas, and they would also sit there but they wouldn't tolerate any other bird, and there was another pair of skuas who used to sit on the ground, sit shouting in bird speak at each other again to occupy the best position to get scraps and stuff!

[0:32:02] Verdenius: And really with all the animals you could get really close?

Cannon: Yeah I guess so. Well it varied, some individuals were more tolerant than others. Well you wouldn't, I'm also thinking of like fur seals, I don't think anyone would try to stroke fur seals, you're pretty liable to get bitten or something! Weddell seals, which were quite attractive, it was possible with certain individuals to sort of stroke pups if the mothers were very tolerant. Seals like leopard seals it was again very unusual to see those on the land, you would mostly see them in the water and they're pretty fierce looking in the water, so I don't think you'd get too close to them! Penguins again would tolerate you getting pretty close; if you walked through a colony you're likely to sort of be pecked and they would sort of hit you with their flippers which could surprisingly hard actually, quite a strong hard thing a penguin flipper! Yeah, my own particular favourite, which you admit to all these vices, but was to tickle elephant seal pups! Elephant seal pups put on an enormous amount of weight and just not abandoned by the mother but the mother goes off and comes back just occasionally to feed them; they just take on an enormous amount of milk and grow really fast. But when they are at the very young stage and they're just lying there like big round sausages really, often in the summer I sometimes you could just up to one and just gentle tickle under its arm and it would sort of wake up and look at this human being standing over it and then they would get upset! But some didn't seem to mind you doing that, but this is only my preferences - probably other people were not so interested in tickling elephant seals, I wouldn't try to tickle the big ones. [laughter]

[0:34:35] Verdenius: Do you think that they liked it?

Cannon: Probably not. I think [laughing] it was probably....

[0:34:40] Verdenius: Did they smile!?

Cannon: No I don't think it probably made a great deal of difference to them actually....but no, I think they are fairly insensitive creatures actually when it comes to tickling, covered in blubber and so on. No I think the young ones, it was only certain individuals that would tolerate this and then would sort of scuttle off again You don't want to be causing too much disturbance trying to do something like that. And the Weddell seal pups were very nice because they had such beautiful fur, so honestly if you could stroke one it was a nice experience they had very long silvery fur.

[0:35:24] Verdenius: That's interesting, it seems that you were into a lot of touching a lot of these animals?

Cannon: Well yes, I suppose seals, it's a sort of natural thing that you want to do, to reach out - obviously if something bites back you pull your hand back! I think if you see a baby seal or something like that you're out walking I think most people would stop and just see how close they could get, carefully approach it. Usually the mother of a Weddell seal would but herself between you and the pup and then would bark at you so normally it would not be possible to do that, yeah, I think.

[0:36:14] Verdenius: Because just you said like earlier we are now trying to let nature settle?

Cannon: Yeah well I think that's.

[0:36:24] Verdenius: It's not very exciting we need to forget the test.

Cannon: Well these are probably my unmet needs [laughter] something more touching. No seriously, yeah it's not as though it has any effect, I think it's just something you do when you see some young furry attractive seals or something like that, something very cuddly about it.

[0:37:06] Verdenius: But did you get on base visits from other Antarctic nationalities?

Cannon: No. I think people often ask that haven't been to the Antarctic but really the bases are so far apart mostly in the Antarctic that yes sometimes there are exchanges and visits especially if you are on a ship. But I think once you are located in a particular place it's very difficult to travel around, Having said that there was in the South Orkney Islands there was one other base which was an Argentinian base which was quite a long way away. We were sort of aware they were there, but it wouldn't be possible to go there by land, or wouldn't be possible to go down by small launch, you'd have to go on a ship so effectively you are isolated. And then apart from that the nearest base would be thousands of miles away, so either on the Antarctic continent or maybe South Georgia which about 800 miles away! So no, you're very isolated. I think most Antarctic bases are like that, apart from a few places on the Antarctic Peninsula where a number of bases of different nationalities on the same island where that happens, or there's Scott base which is next to the America base. But yeah so obviously where there are bases together you get interchange. Occasionally you get a ship of a different nationality may call in, that's possible, but usually not if there's no reason to do that. Having said that when we were down on the peninsula we stopped off at an Argentine base, which was just after the Falklands conflict and whose name I would have to look up.



But I remember the Argentine scientists coming on board and being very friendly and nice and no problems despite the recent politics. I think that's the way it goes in the Antarctic. I think...very little awareness of sort of politic things you're just there, people, scientists or whatever that are doing your work in the Antarctic and interesting to meet other people that are doing the same.

[0:39:44] Verdenius: The Argentine were just scientists?

Cannon: Yeah they were a group of them, I think a couple of scientists and I think a base commander who was military man. I remember the difference, there were some differences there between the attitudes of those two people that the scientist was a, I mean in the Argentine they have of I think he was of Swedish extraction because they have so many different nationalities in Argentina, they have some Welsh that live in the south and so on, and that was a successful visit, we enjoyed it! I think there is some national awareness I suppose within the fact you are on a British base which is located in British Antarctic Territory, you're aware of that and I think people are to some extent aware there is perhaps a political role but it's somewhat undefined? But the fact you're there, that it's supported by the government, is something that you are aware of, but I don't think it's a very important feature for most people, it just happens to be the way it is, and you go to the Antarctic, well I think go for a whole variety of reasons, but for whatever individual reason people go there whether to explore mountains or to take pictures to do science or whatever just to experience an adventure I think it varies really what brings people in!

[0:41:30] Verdenius: I have always thought of the...scientists that go to Antarctica now are quite different the last ten years, quite different to the scientists that went there 30 or 40 years ago, far more specialised programmes?

Cannon: I'm sure that's right...the world changes and the jobs change. I'm sure people now are more restricted in their work programme in the sense that they we have a better defined of the idea of the work we are going to do better. And sometimes the periods that they go for, particularly if it's on a ship, maybe limited in terms of resources or whatever and so they might have to quite a lot of work in a very short period. I think BAS, British Antarctic Survey, is fairly unique in having people that go for two and half years and spend all of that time maybe doing a fairly generalised work programme as well. But then again it does give an opportunity for a sort of life experience in a sense that you don't get if you just go down as a scientist for six weeks or eight weeks, maybe just experience, you see the site but it's not living....the whole seasons and living in slightly different way. I think than just a scientist carrying out his work which could be anywhere, apart from the physical beauty and the wildlife of the Antarctic, but I think that's a more old fashioned type of thing and also of course it's changing. The year I went down we had satellite navigation systems come in and satellite communication systems installed and so on, so it's much easier to contact people on the phone, or fax back things, so in a way the world shrinks in that sense, and I'm really glad that I experienced that whole year of living, the whole year in the Antarctic, without being in communication very much except for a monthly telegram, 200 words back home something like that. Just to have that experience really and it was nice to experience what it's like to be

a long way away and somewhat out of touch, not that I always want to be like that but it was nice to be able to have that experience, and I think in past it was much more, so people were much more reliant on their own devices and their own resources and would go off for long periods of time and really have to rely on no backup! Whereas now I think people will have probably for good reasons as well for safety reason there's more reliance on professional backup and so on.

[0:44:44] Verdenius: So communications from home?

Cannon: Yes from and to home yes, and in spite of the fact they did install a telephone that particular year and it was possible to just dial home, which I did do once in the 15 months I was there, but I didn't really want to be in a position of doing that regularly. One of the reasons I was there was to experience being in a remote place and not having people ring up every day as were! It was actually not possible to ring up except in emergencies, to go through the headquarters, but I found 200 words was sufficient and I think I've got the telegrams actually. And I would send them to my parents and if anybody was interested in what I was doing or what was happening to me they could speak to my parents and find out from them. And if you were careful you can put a lot into 200 words, you could get pretty much all the information [laughter] you want, maybe not a lot happens?

[0:46:01] Verdenius: What can you get?

Cannon: What can you get?

[0:46:09] Verdenius: Yeah.

Cannon: [Sounds of lot of paper being sorted, as looking for old air letters]. Well, some of them are sort of personal things, for example my grandmother died while I there and so I was writing about that. But mainly it's describing what was happening, so for example this was written in February so this is February now:

*'A very busy month. Bransfield [that's one of the ships] arrived from Halley Bay [that's another base] some people left us and others arrived, a different smaller base contingent though final leg for me...'*

I worked hard getting a paper done I was working on some papers that I was faxing back for journals, and one of the highlights of being down there was visits from cruise ships. There were two cruise ships operating at the time and they would call into the base and it was quite exciting to go on board and give slide shows and meet people and have drinks bought you at the bar, it was all quite a laugh. So the final visit of the *World Discoverer*, that was one of the ships.

*"I drew a fur seal on whale bone but stayed ashore the captain was pleased and reciprocated with a T shirt and champagne unfortunately missed close sighting of two southern right whales from the ship! However on a second occasion saw these species close to Signy; some divers went in with it and another visit of a ship. The John Biscoe called with BAS women! Women scientist visiting and a Euro MP and several veterans from a pre-war expedition*

*some interesting discussions had dinner in the wardroom most enjoyable to be back home again-back on board again! Had a cake on my birthday everyone ate yours before Christmas sorry I'm not really into this organized telepathy [laughter] that was my mother's idea that we could communicate by telepathy! Fur seals abound everywhere walking to Gourlay is hazardous without a stick."*

And so on, just general chit chat [sounds of papers being sorted again]:

*"The midwinter meal"!*

This was produced by a friend with a picture of a penguin on the front and it's the Midwinter programme so it's a very special time of year in deepest midwinter, which is June, and this was this was the itinerary for the day.

*"10 o'clock breakfast served in bed by the Base Commander Dr Alan Wootton."*

He wrote this evening Midwinter radio show, don't know whether we did that ourselves?

*"17.00 cocktails in the lounge, 18.00 midwinter banquet followed by the presentation of the Midwinter presents"!*

Yeah we all had to make presents for each other. You draw a name out of a hat then you make special present for that person and so on and so it goes on and that was a Monday.

*"Wednesday buffet luncheon, evening Midwinter films [laughter] Thursday 11 o'clock cricket match and in the afternoon darts match with Rothera".*

Yes we used to play darts over the phone, I'd forgotten that.

*"Evening pop quiz and the next evening charades followed by poker tournament in the late evening".*

This obviously went on all week I'd forgotten this!

*"11 o'clock sports final".*

I can't even remember what the sports were!

*"The evening the Midwinter Play".*

That's right we had to, we produced a play and with different scenes and various things that everybody, well not everybody, thought were funny I guess so yeah!

[0:50:37] Verdenius: Did you have Christmas while you were there?

Cannon: That is really like the Christmas, yeah.

[0:50:40] Verdenius: In June?

Cannon: Because Christmas comes in the summer, the Antarctic summer, and so it's a time when everyone is very busy. The base is crowded with a lot of people that are just there for

the summer so it's not really celebrated very much it's very a busy time, a working time, whereas in the deep midwinter it's more like an Antarctic Christmas if you like, so that's the equivalent.

[0:51:11] Verdenius: Is there anything about religious services, things like that?

Cannon: No I don't remember there being any, not on our base!

[0:51:26] Verdenius: Sure there must have been some I don't know quite religious people?

Cannon: Well I guess there was, I can think of one person, although I don't think he was there in my winter, but yeah people that were religious, but yeah that was a private thing. I can guess if you had a whole base of deeply religious people then they would have a service, but I think most of us weren't particularly religious and not interested in doing that so yeah, wasn't a thing yeah maybe it went on some place but....

[0:52:06] Verdenius: I was just wondering supposed that some man died on base probably he would be buried?

Cannon: Well yeah, yes I think that would be different then. I think you would have a service then yeah, but not having experienced that I wouldn't know but yes I mean I guess so yeah we were never in that experience, never had that situation. But I'm sure in that sort of circumstance you would say some words, yeah.

[0:52:50] Verdenius: Can you talk some more on the letters?

Cannon: Can we just have a break for a minute?

[0:53:00] Verdenius: Yes!

Cannon: How are you doing on the drink front?

[0:53:13] Verdenius: A modernist in this country?

Cannon: A what!?

[0:53:16] Verdenius: No a modernist country?

Cannon: Who said that, a post modernist? [Laughter]

[0:53:21] Verdenius: A modernist! I don't know if you know [can't hear the first part of this word something pine it's an American word?

Cannon: Something pine, no?

[0:53:46] Verdenius: But the idea was that the concept fits in perfectly with modernism, 19th century modernists because of an obsession with selfies? [Very difficult to pick up what he says or means during this exchange].

Cannon: Yes. I didn't experience the barren wastes if you like of the Antarctic Plateau and that part of the Antarctic, although there times when just walking over a small ice cap that it's a whiteout or something you experience that sort of....being surrounded by whiteness or something like that! But mostly on these Antarctic maritime islands there's such a wealth of things to see, the wildlife, there's a lot of interesting things going on that it's certainly not in your brain it's out there, although I think there are plenty of times for it on reflection. For example staying in field huts I think that was very important to me, I really enjoyed that and just listening to the environment, just hearing the wind or if there was no wind just listening to the sounds of the birds and the seals, which I found a very nice experience spiritually if you like, just a very peaceful place. When I, people often ask me 'Did you not feel lonely?' for example. for there were 11 people on the other side of the island and you would just spend time by yourself, by myself in a little hut for two or three days. I found that, or just one night I found that not at all lonely, found it very peaceful and relaxing, just I felt quite at home there in a way, maybe that was just my response to the place! I never felt I was millions of miles from anything. I always felt very much at home on that island, didn't really feel different from being anywhere else in the sense you feel you're in a different place, it felt like home really! And I guess because it wasn't a different country, it wasn't like being in Russia or something which for example there was in Russia over Christmas, and I really felt like I was in a different world; it was after a time the cultural differences make you feel I really felt like I was on a different planet! The ex-communist way really when you look closer is so different from the West, yeah, I got that experience. Obviously there are similarities, I think there are huge differences, bigger differences than like I felt in Africa or in Antarctica or anywhere like that. Or maybe if I was in the natural world in Russia or somewhere I would feel at home because I think one feels at home in nature, at least I do, maybe not everyone does but I do!

[0:57:16] Verdenius: I stayed for half a year Czechoslovakia.

Cannon: Oh yeah?

[0:57:26] Verdenius: And I didn't feel that much.

Cannon: Well perhaps it was the experience of going to Moscow in the middle of winter and staying in not very good hotels and so on was quite alienating, an alienating experience so I found actually, particularly now Moscow so it's really not an easy town; think they are going to go through a lot of hard times and in that sense I felt really in very different place, maybe in the summer it would be different? But yeah I think really what I'm talking about is actually being close to nature, and I think when you are close to nature you don't feel alienated you feel at home. Being in tower block in Moscow can be a very alienating experience because it's not a very beautiful place, it's an ugly suburban place!

[0:58:24] Verdenius: Yeah but some of suburbs are quite eerie.

Cannon: Yeah, I kept thinking what it would be like to when in that system, that communist system, and really just imagined it being very, very trapped. There was no escape if you are

born into one those Brezhnev boxes as they as they call them, it's going to be very hard to get yourself out of that system and I think that doesn't appeal to me at all!

[0:59:08] Verdenius: Well I don't know. I met some people that didn't want to get out at all and were quite happy in their box, yes settled.

Cannon: Yeah, I think it's not possible to generalise about some of these things because I know people who, for an example, to be in a hut in the Antarctic would be a very unpleasant experience for them, they wouldn't want that at all, they're much happier watching the TV, being in a pub, and I think there was some people who found that. I think most people who went to the Antarctic knew what they were getting themselves into, but I think one or two who came originally, who found it difficult because they were away from all their familiar surroundings, their friends their family, their going to football matches every week, the social structure they were used to, that they found life in the Antarctic harder for that reason. I think some people found that quite hard. But I think most people who went were selected, you knew what you were going to pretty much and you wanted back to do it, wanted to and try and see anyway, and I think most people coped with it fairly well. But a lot of people certainly speaking for myself, my background was one of always moving around as a child, my father travelling all around the world, so I was used to that sort of existence. And I went to a boarding school and I think you develop a lot of the social skills needed for an Antarctic base, which is!! [Laughter]

[01:01:13] Verdenius: What is a boarding school?

Cannon: A boarding school is where you stay away from your parents at the school.

[01:01:23] Verdenius: In England?

Cannon: Yes....but none the less having spent a year & half in the Antarctic I think that was sufficient for me, I was pretty keen get back, to get away and just get back to normal. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to spent any more time and maybe even 15 months was a bit of a strain at the end. And yet it was a strain living with other people, other guys, and having to accommodate, get on with people all the time! And it was nice just to get away and be free by yourself and not have to worry about fitting in with everyone else, not that it isn't good experience to have done that.

[01:02:20] Verdenius: Did you ever consider working more at Cambridge?

Cannon: When I joined BAS I was very careful not to commit myself without finding out what it was like, so I joined and said I would only do two summer visits. When I joined I wasn't particularly looking for a long isolated experience. When talk to people who are friends and I respect and said 'Go for the whole year and a half and you'll enjoy the experience, and you'll see the winter which is the best time,' then I said that I would and was glad that I did that, but I think I would have found that Halley Bay for two and a half years or something really was something too much for me! For a start maybe if you are motivated by the work and you were doing work that really interested you and that was the place to do it, atmospheric studies or something, but no I think I would have found it very hard because I

am a bit of a loner I like to get away. As I said I walked more than most people, I got, part of that was just getting me away from other people, finding my own centre and just being by myself a little time and it was easy to do that on Signy. Most days of the year it was very rarely too windy or too cold to do that and so was much easier than having to live in a tube under the ice, with all the restrictions that involved!! I think I would have found that very hard actually, and without the wildlife ,yeah.

[01:04:23] Verdenius: Would you imagine yourself at the South Pole as part of an expedition, like Scott or Shackleton did?

Cannon: I suppose I could in the sense that I could imagine myself being on such an expedition. Certainly the whole adventure of going in a ship to the Antarctic would have appealed to me when I, my grandfather was in the navy all his life and when I was a very small child he used to tell me stories of him being in the navy before the second World war, and when he went to China and places like that so I had that in my blood if you like! And I think it very much would have appealed to me, I think I would have found it a stifling experience with what I've read about sort of being with Scott and going on that, I think I would have been maybe, hope I would perhaps, been a bit of a rebel and said 'Why do we have to do this?' or, 'Why do we have to carry these rocks?' or something! I think I would have been a little more questioning, but it's very easy to say that because that's sort of a more modern attitude...I'm not naturally a rebellious person I'm diplomatic and tend to fit in and get on and so on, so it's possible that I would, yeah I can imagine myself being swept up in something like that yeah! But I can imagine myself being more like being Dr Wilson or somebody like that who's more interested in being there for reasons of discovery or painting or biology or something like that than some sort of other than the slightly heroic reasons. I don't think that would appeal to me think I would have been very suspect about that, and would tried to get myself out of being involved in something like that, yeah! And yeah I'm very suspect of doing things for their own sake as it were, like going somewhere because it was there I'm not someone that is interested in climbing a mountain or doing something heroic like climbing an ice cliff or something that's, partly I'm not terribly adventurous like that, I wouldn't do it because I'd probably admire people who do that who it's interesting to meet people and to see they are different and they like to do that and maybe they are stronger in some ways.

[01:07:25] Verdenius: You weren't very adventurous at Signy?

Cannon: We didn't have terribly adventurous people, I must admit there were people who were more adventurous than me and people who did do climbing and so on but....

[01:07:38] Verdenius: Did try anything adventurous?

Cannon: Well we didn't really have very many sort of expeditions; it was possible to go to Coronation Island and some people did that. I think I was pretty timid on the whole and I didn't, I was kind of very wary about sea ice and only venture on to sea ice if I was absolutely certain that it was really thick and firm and so on! So that side didn't appeal to me at all, I liked to stay terra firma, and I don't have terribly good head for heights so I wasn't

very interested in ice climbing or something like that, and there were occasions when we had to practice that, or learn how to do it, lower a stretcher down a cliff, and I used to find that quite an ordeal [laughter]. So I was happy, I was fine, I could walk up over mountains and in that sense I was more active than a lot of people but I'm not interested in finding myself by scaling an ice cliff or something! But it was an interesting experience to meet people who were very much like that and who obviously had qualities that I didn't have, and that was one of the nice things about the British Antarctic Survey that you do meet a variety of people. I think you could describe people in two groups as thinkers & doers if you like, people that are very good at using their brain and thinking about things and perhaps not very good at doing things, I think you need a little bit of both. But there were some very good doers; some of the Base Commanders I think who were really excellent in getting things done and motivating other people, you really wanted around you if any problems and you know I think it's important to recognize your own skills and other people's skills.

[01:09:57] Verdenius: [Can't actually hear the question]?

Cannon: Well I suppose scientists by the nature are often cerebral, more thinking type people and tend to be perhaps more introverted than people who are motivated to go down and maybe climb mountains, maybe more extrovert type? So yeah they were those differences, but you know there was some people that didn't necessarily always fall into that category and there were some people that were both... think you need a bit of both you obviously need to be a doer as well but some people are just excellent organizers and good at motivating other people or just being leaders! And being in those sort situations it's useful to be able to recognize those skills that people have...it's useful for your life afterwards, maybe working in a company or something recognizing different skills that people have that can contribute to a team. I think actually we could have put more, knowing what I know now having worked in management, that there could have been more team building, but people are young and are coming from very different backgrounds and so on, it's kind of just make the best of the group you find yourself in. For my guess there would experiences of different groups of different times in different places would be very different, people's personal experiences would be very different. And even within the same group people's experiences of a year or a winter would be different for some people it might be a fantastic time, for others it might have been difficult and sometimes you never know that either! You never know who quite gets on with who, some people are obviously good friends and get on well with others and other people are not so much good friends and find each other difficult and sometimes you are not even aware of that. If there was a big problem, yes I know about it, even with 12 people there is a lot of interactions that are possible between individuals, even a group of that size is quite a complex social structure! Which is interesting that human beings are interested in other human beings in that's part of the interest, the ups and downs the pleasures and pains of being in any group.

[01:12:51] Verdenius: Yes, being in the first group of women which went to the Antarctic?

Cannon: No, I think we did have some visiting female scientists although I think it was kind of a very short visit when we were there. I think that happened the year after I left and the



year after my visit and tended to come more so that wasn't something that I experienced very much apart from an occasional visit. Yeah, so we were all men for 12 in the winter and more in the summer yeah, and obviously that was a topic of interest but no direct experience to relate.

[01:13:54] Verdenius: Didn't seem?

Cannon: Didn't seem?

[01:13:58] Verdenius: Didn't seem a...?

Cannon: Didn't seem a what?

[01:14:03] Verdenius: ???[Incomprehensible].

Cannon: How do you mean? Say it another way?

[01:14:07] Verdenius: Let me see, didn't seem odd at the time?

Cannon: Oh right! The fact there weren't women there? I didn't really see it, it felt unnatural and I didn't experience of it being a throwback to previous times although I see the point you're making. In a sense it is and in a sense it was an old fashioned attitude in a way...in that criticism. No I mean it was the experience that was on offer if it as it were, it was a take it or leave it situation, you worked for BAS and you went there and where you found yourself. I think it would have been a more interesting experience if there had have been women but....it wasn't something that one thought very much about other than just missing the company of women!

[01:15:17] Verdenius: ???[Inaudible].

Cannon: Yeah [laughter]

[01:15:27] Verdenius: Ok, you don't think I've forgotten something?

Cannon: You said you wanted to hear more of these [note: probably more air letters] you've probably got a lot of stuff there, and you're welcome if you want to hear more.

[01:15:47] Verdenius: Not the letters, I wanted to ask about your own state of mind?

Cannon: State of mind, my God! It's very difficult to pick out actually I'd probably have to look...certainly one of the things like if you sat [laughter] God forbid if you try and read through all this. Certainly one of the things I think that comes out of it is the changing state of mind that you're in, that I was in anyway, and I don't think I was particularly unusual. I found I would go through... for me I suppose there were difficult times, there were times when you had problems in interacting with certain other significant difficult people on the base, and there were people who you'd never have a problem with because you were friends with them and they would be somebody who you could relate to you, had a lot in common with, and there was no problem in communication. But in any group of people there would be some that you don't relate well to, there maybe even mutual dislike, or probably more

typically you just don't understand each other so well, so there's sometimes difficulties in communication, and there were certain people occasionally who you would, what I would describe to myself like a negative interaction, you would get into some difficulty or confusion some misunderstanding maybe a trivial thing, quite often it was a trivial thing the actual event maybe of no importance but other than the fact it was some misunderstanding. And then that would cause you some distress and then you would have to try and sort it out with that person and or just let time go by it would melt away to nothing. But certainly I found over the winter there was a propensity for that to happen. People were living in this fairly artificial unnatural sort of situation, in fact I think people would be surprised. I think I was quite withdrawn in that situation because you are there by yourself you in that situations who are not friends, it's not as if you've taken your best friends and gone, these are those you happen to be with some of which become friends obviously, but it's not always easy! And so I found a lot of my ups and downs were occasioned of how I was getting on with person X or person Y sort of thing that seemed to have but I didn't have any problems and don't think we had any major problems as a base that particular year. I think some people had more difficulties than others, I think generally it was fairly OK in the way of things some people get on more easily than others. And I think some people's experience of these sort of situations just depends on their own personality, just go through life and don't seem to have very many problems in communicating, whereas others have a lot of problems in communicating with anybody, communicating is just a problem with them! So I think then of course it would depend on what, as certainly towards the end of winter was a difficult time, I think for most people that if the weather was just bad for a long time, if you couldn't get out much, just grey and overcast bit like England, everybody gets very depressed! [Laughter] If just then the sun comes out and everyone feels better!

[01:20:00] Verdenius: [Inaudible].

Cannon: [Laughter] Yes! So and you know also one is very much concerned, well I was concerned with my...things that concerned me, what I was doing with my life when I went home and what I was trying to achieve and all those sort of things. So because you'er there in that sort of environment I certainly wrote about some of those things, what I thought I was going with my life what sort of job I was looking for maybe in the long term, those sort of issues, whether I wanted to be a scientist or carry on doing that sort of thing, whether I would come back maybe to the Antarctic?

[01:20:50] Verdenius: Did you ever at a certain stage think you would come back and wouldn't fit back into society?

Cannon: No I don't think I ever did feel that because I think I've always been a fairly sociable person! So I didn't think, as I said before people go to the Antarctic for a variety of different reasons I think there are some people that go there because to some extent are a little bit of missfits and they like that environment, maybe some people like the environment of it being all men, being a restricted place and not a lot of social interaction, maybe there are certain people that appeals to? But I think my own reasons for going were to experience it, the wildlife, the place, the beauty of it and so on. So I was pretty desperate to get back to

what I would call normal life and in fact when I came back I was a bit anxious and nervous, I think a lot of people are, having lived that sort of life for a while and I didn't find it easy to immediately just fit back into the life I'd left before, so I went off on holiday. I went off to Greece I think for about six weeks where I didn't meet people who knew I'd just been in the Antarctic for six months and wanted to know everything about it. It just gave me a chance just to unwind, just to be myself, and after that then I was ready to relate all my experiences to people! But when I immediately came back I wasn't really ready to relate how I was feeling because I guess I was feeling a bit tense when I came back! But that was my experience, I don't how general that was?

[01:22:47] Verdenius: No I don't know. I've heard the story from people who went to Halley Bay they were talking about when they came back and also talking about the idea it's supposed to be difficult?

Cannon: Oh right!

[01:23:04] Verdenius: Stay here till they take us away?

Cannon: Yeah there was a sort of....

[01:23:06] Verdenius: Will the ship ever come back!?

Cannon: Yeah that's right, no that's true, you are aware of that because I know on Signy Island a couple of years before I was there one year the ship didn't get in at the end of the summer and there was an enforced winter, in other words a lot of people had to spend another winter which was a third winter for some people, which was very long time! So that's why I was very anxious to get on the ship as soon as it came because I certainly didn't want to spend another winter! The thing about the bomb the world has changed actually since the ten years I was there, I don't think people think about that very much, but yes there was the feeling that yeah if there was nuclear war that you would survive! That yeah, maybe the northern hemispheres would obliterated yeah, that did cross your mind. I think people were much more aware of that, when the USSR was still existing, I think that it's kind of gone away a bit now, but I think people did think that, but then of course I went after the Falklands war and I think the Falklands war was kind of a shock to people? Because there you had a major war in the South Atlantic so I don't think there was a sense in which people felt there were terribly safe, and in fact I'd heard all the stories of when the Argentines invaded South Georgia and a couple of people who I knew were involved in that, and some went off and stayed for a month in a remote hut, other people were captured and spent three weeks in Ushaia and the people who were in the Antarctic at the time of the Falklands conflict I think were fairly worried because there was no guarantees that things would spread down there? And so I think that was little bit of a worrying time but it didn't...so?

[01:25:09] Verdenius: Alright!

Some interesting clips:

- Meeting one of the first penguins back after the winter! [0:17:42]
- Why penguins prefer to walk over a hill than return to the sea. Pecking order of Sheathbills feed by the base kitchen. [0:28:40]
- Tickling baby seals! [0:32:02]
- Visit to an Argentine base just after the Falklands conflict! [0:39:44]
- Reading out some of his air letters he sent home. And the week long midwinter entertainment programme of 1983! [0:46:09]