

JEFFERY McDERMOTT

Edited transcript of a recording of Jeffery McDermott interviewed by Jaap Verdenius on 6th February 1993. BAS Archives reference AD6/24/3/23. Transcribed by Dawn Sutcliffe on 15th December 2020.

[0:00:00] Verdenius: What would you do if you would go down and as you land somewhere in the country? What would you do?

McDermott: Very rarely. It happened very rarely, in fact it happened only 3 or 4 times and, on each occasion, we managed to find, we managed to land at one of our bases even though they weren't equipped for aeroplanes we actually landed there. All I was worried about was getting down. I wasn't worried about what happened to the aeroplane. It could be blown away after that, I just didn't care. As long as we got down that's all that mattered. Fortunately, in every case we managed to get off again. Once the weather cleared, we managed to get away and eventually get home again. On every occasion it happened I never thought I would ever get back in the aeroplane again, I was that frightened. It's a fear that if you get lost in a place like that; mostly it's because we would get lost. The weather would close in and navigation equipment was very, very poor; you couldn't rely on it. We were surrounded by mountains of 2000 metres and the bases were all at sea level. That part of Graham Land was very mountainous, it was just a great spine of mountains and the bases are lined up along the sides. If you did get lost or the weather closed in that bad you just didn't know where you were going. It's as simple as that. Everything had to be done visually; find your way by sight. If the weather did get that bad you couldn't see the sun, you couldn't rise above the cloud and you didn't know how far you were going to go down. It was quite worrying. Especially with no sun you get white out conditions. White out - you can see nothing. There's no shadow. If you haven't got a rock or something black that you can see or even the sea for that matter you can't register on anything. You don't know exactly how high you are off the ground.

[0:02:16] McDermott: In fact, that's how our aeroplane crashed, the one that did crash. It was actually coming into land with a full load and the conditions, it was very late at night. It was about 12 o'clock at night; in mid-summer so it was daylight, but not bright sunlight and he thought he was actually on the ground and he wasn't. He was 20 feet up and he closed his throttles and the aeroplane just fell. Of course, the under carriage came up right through the aeroplane. That was the end of it, it was a right off. But those are the sort of conditions you get into. Obviously, you don't

intend to do it but if you're flying 200 miles to another base or to a depot to put in a food depot somewhere, there's nobody there. Usually, you leave a food supply with a pole on it, sledging pole so others can find it. If you fly there you unload it, you come back and suddenly the weather closes in and you're on your own; its as simple as that. You've got to find your own way home. There are no radio beacons and things like that, there's nothing. It's just a case of sight and keep your fingers crossed.

[0:03:24] McDermott: Three or four occasions we did get caught. On every occasion fortunately I knew the land a lot better than the pilots especially my last year because I'd been down there; this is my third year; I'd been down there two summers, and I knew the whole of Graham Land like the back of my hand really. I made sure I knew it for the simple reason that I realised that one day I might have to walk. We carried lots of survival equipment in the aeroplane, small sledges, tent, sleeping bags, food supplies, all of these sort of things we carried. You made sure it was up to date and all prepared because you never knew. You may have to use it. Consequently, I knew the country like the back of my hand. I knew every refuge, every hut. Manned or unmanned it didn't make any difference. As long as there was something there. There was a hut there, it usually had supplies in, there would usually be a radio and all sort of things so if you could get to them you would have a fairly good chance of survival. Fortunately, we always managed to find a space or find a way and we'd arrive at some base where the weather was clear enough for us to get down. We'd land the aeroplane and that was that. I used to get out and say 'that's it finished. I'm not going to go back in that thing'. But invariably three or four days later the weather would clear, and we'd have a go at getting this thing off the ground again. Every time we succeeded. We finished the end of the season, that particular flight season, with a record number of flights, so we did very well with one aeroplane. At times it was frightening. I almost have nightmares now when I think about it. You're just flying along and suddenly the weather closes and you think 'where are we?' My pilot then was a RAF chap called Julian Brett. He was an ex-Vulcan bomber pilot. Very, very good pilot, excellent pilot. He would say 'well where are we then?' I would say 'take it up, take it up. We're coming out the top'. You'd go up and up and up and up and it wouldn't go any higher and you hadn't come out. Left and right and it was an awful feeling because you knew that you've got so much fuel in the plane, you knew how long it could stay up. You knew approximately where you were, but you didn't know exactly. If you went down to sea level, even if you saw the sea before you hit it because in the winter at that time of the year it would all be frozen. You could hit an iceberg; you could fly into

an iceberg. The sea although it was flat, there's great icebergs sticking out all over the place, you have to weave your way round them. They were quite useful sometimes because you could recognise them, they were all different shapes. From a base you could see maybe three or four hundred icebergs and they were all different shapes. You gave them names, we had names for them. They were good landmarks really if you could see them and if you were low enough.

[0:06:31] Verdenius: What sort of range did you fly?

McDermott: We had a range of about 200 miles from base. We could go a bit further, but we wouldn't go much further than 250 miles because we'd have to allow for getting back again. If we were flying somewhere and there was a fuel dump obviously, we could do it. There's really only one base that had a fuel dump and we used to fly down there and back again. That base was supplied completely by air and it was only open during the summer. They never wintered there, only spent summer parties there. You could fly there and obviously refuel and further south from that, that's a place called Fossil Bluff. That was our most furthest southerly base at that time. I think it was about 150 miles from the edge of the sea. That was as close as a ship could possibly get to it. All the other bases the ships could get into very close. Our summer operating base was Adelaide Island Base F. It's now closed, they've now moved to a place called Rothera now isn't it? Adelaide was our base there and the aircraft were kept up on a plateau about 2 miles from the base; just out in the open, completely open. We would sink aviation fuel drums into the snow, into the ice and tie them to those so the aeroplanes were actually tied down all the time. If they weren't flying, they were actually secured, they'd blow away otherwise. The winds at 80 or 90 knots, they'd just blow the aeroplane away, so they obviously had to be tethered into wind: hopefully the most prevalent wind. And that's where they stayed for the summer. Once we started flying, they stayed outside for 6 months. The end of the flying season we would fly back to Deception Island and we had a hangar at Deception. Once we got to Deception we would land there, and they went into the hangar and they'd be in there for 6 months. During the winter we would service them, repair them and whatever. After the 6 months, the beginning of the flying season out they would come again, and we'd fly off south to Adelaide.

[0:08:55] Verdenius: Did you ever fly in the winter?

McDermott: No. In the winter the conditions were too severe really. Although there wasn't a vast amount of snow at Deception especially and you probably could have done if you could have got the aeroplanes out of the hangar,

but it could take 2 weeks to get them out. The hangar was built for 2 Beaver aircraft which are considerably smaller than Otters. When they'd got 2 Otters, they couldn't get them in straight, we had to put them in sideways and interlocking so you had to jack them up, put them on skates, push them in and so they were very, very tight. In fact, you'll see some slides possibly of what they looked like in there. So, once they were in the hangar, they were there for 6 months. If it snowed, the snow could be 8 feet up against the doors. To open the doors, you had to dig all the snow out, de-freeze the rails, open the doors. Hopefully, snow didn't come up otherwise it would just bury it all again. So, you could dig it all out, it's all done by hand, get these things out which it would take you a couple of days to get them out. So, once they were out of the hangar they never went back in again until the following winter. It wasn't a case of just pushing them in and pushing them out, it was bad organisation if you like but they couldn't afford to change the hangars and they couldn't afford to change the aeroplanes, so we had to put up with what they had. It was very, very much run on a shoestring. If you didn't have something you had to, if you had a spare part you didn't have, you'd have to make something up or get round it in some way, shape or form. I must admit at the end of a flying season our aeroplanes were not really air worthy. Some of the things I did down there, if I'd done them in this country I could have gone to prison because they were very, very suspect. I had controls held together with bits of wire and nails and hydraulic reservoirs I'd made out of paint tins. All these sorts of things; if you want to keep flying, you've got to do something. At times it was a bit risky. If you had the confidence in yourself and your ability and the pilot had confidence in you, obviously if the thing was flying you went in it. You're not going to make up something that was that ludicrous that you'd be frightened of flying in it yourself. So, you've got to have this confidence in yourself and your own ability. Up until that last summer I had it. But last summer, Hugh [REDACTED] put doubts in my own mind, and I started to suspect my own abilities really. That's what made it more frightening, I think. Up until that point I'd felt ok. With a single engine it's always a risk. If the thing stops mate you're going down. There's no two ways about it.

[0:11:55] Verdenius: What were you thinking at the time? You already knew that it was risky?

McDermott: Oh yes you know it's risky. You do that's right you do. You have this confidence. I was a young man; I was full of (...) I'd been working with aeroplanes a long time or a fair amount of time anyway. You do have this certain confidence in yourself. If I thought something was

risky, I would say 'right we've got to do this to it, we've got to repair this, we've got to have a look at this, do this do that' and you do it. If you haven't got the confidence in it, you wouldn't go in the thing. The last summer the aeroplane performed better than it ever performed before even though Hugh had told me that the engine was going to seize up. He said there was metal particles in the filters that we looked at the winter before. He decided that the bearings were going to break up and I said, 'no they're not'. And it was one for one really, he said it was and I said it wasn't. Again, he had a lot more experience than me.

but the thought was there in my mind that this thing was going to go. Though I was fairly confident that it wasn't, the thought is still there: The damage is done. So, I used to worry a bit about it. Especially when we'd get lost somewhere or you couldn't find your way. You'd think 'oh God now the engines going to go'. You do become very blasé with it.

[0:13:35] Verdenius: We got to the stage where we had various fuel tanks in the aeroplane and to make sure that you'd got all the fuel out of one tank we would take it completely dry. We would run it until the engine stopped and only then would we turn that tank off and turn the next one on. The first time it happened it happened by mistake and it was a panic because the engine stopped, and we were coming down. You were climbing up the wall, it was absolute sheer panic! We realised what was wrong; we hadn't switched from the main fuel tank to one of the smaller ones. After a while we thought this might be a good way of ensuring we get all the fuel out of each tank one after the other. We did actually do that at times on a very long run. It's not a good practice really [laughs]. You think about it, you run it till the engine stops and then just turn the next one on, before you hit the ground it's going again. It's just one of those things you get used to doing. It's a bit hairy but there we are. After a while you don't think anything of it. But if you really sat down rationally and thought about it, it might be a bit of a risk that you shouldn't take.

[0:14:56] Verdenius: It stretches your possibilities

McDermott: Your range? Yes, it always gives us that little bit more fuel if we do need it. It would be unwise to select the tank that you already drained down. Let's go to that one to see if you'd got anything left. You go to that one and find its not there you're still going down, and you've got to change the full one eventually at some point. It was something we did. Not too often I must say because obviously most of our flights were fairly well within range and we had plenty of fuel and we knew we were going to get there and back again. Most of the time we would very rarely fly unless the weather was really good. The weather when it

is good down there is unbelievable, it really is. You could see 150 to 200 miles. It's fantastic because of the clarity, obviously no pollution. You get up there 6000 feet, you can see further than you can fly almost. Just see the tops of the mountains sticking up because they're so far away, you just see the points sticking over the horizon. It's fantastic, it really is beautiful, unbelievable sunshine. It's really glorious. They're the days you want to fly; we would say to somebody or some other base or somewhere, if you're going to fly to somewhere where there is actually somebody at the other end and you say 'what's the weather at your place?' They'd say 'the visibility is, oh we can see 20 miles' that's fine. 'What's the wind doing and where's it coming from?' If it was all ok, we'd be off and away but if it wasn't, they could see only half a mile, I didn't want to go. No way [laughs]

[0:16:47] Verdenius: They call it hypnotic?

McDermott: Yes it could be, yea. It's a funny situation really. But some people if they're not used to aeroplanes, you could be going to visit a sledging party, a team of dogs, a surveyor, a general assistant who have been out maybe two or three months. They've been out doing survey work or something and they're running short of supplies. They say 'can you bring us some supplies or can you bring us this' and we'd say 'what's the visibility like?' and they'd say 'oh it's great, it's great'. We'd take off, when we got close to where they were, we'd say 'what's the visibility?' 'It's alright 200 yards, 200 metres' Of course, I'd go '200 metres! You can't see anything at 200 metres!' They'd still think it was ok to land. They'd say, 'we can hear you' We'd say 'can you see us?' 'No, we can't see you but we can hear you' That doesn't mean anything to me. You can't see them; you don't know where they are. Eventually you'd just see a black spec which is the tent. You don't know which way the land is going, the slope, if you're going into a mountain. You just don't know. You'd ask them occasionally to get away from the tent, take the team away from the tent so you got two points to look at and which way the ground is sloping. Times we've landed at places and it's been with a hill and like that and you've come in like a (clap sound), like that on the side of a hill. Take the power off the aeroplane starts rolling backwards. He puts the power back on again, you leap out and you push the tail round sideways so you're sitting on the hill sideways. They say, 'nice to see you'. Because you're working with people for whom an aeroplane is just an aeroplane, no training of how to lay out a runway or anything like that, they just think you can get in anywhere and take off from anywhere. Sometimes we never landed, we just couldn't, the risk was too great. Other times it was nice and clear, and you just came round and could see them 20

miles away, it was great. And you could land, and have a cup of tea, turn the engine off which was always a risk that it might not start again. [laughs] As long as you had 2 aeroplanes as well you felt relatively safe. But when we lost the one and only had one aeroplane, there's always a risk. It's always there the doubt. My last flying season was quite frightening although it wasn't justified, we survived well. We did a lot of work, it was a good season.

[0:19:50] Verdenius: You said the Chileans and Argentines were better equipped?

McDermott: Oh they were yes, they were much better. They were purely military, they weren't civilian. On Deception Island which was our winter base we had a Chilean base and an Argentinian base. All on the inside of the island. Have you heard about Deception Island at all? The extinct volcano? Although it wasn't extinct, it was really but it erupted slightly a few years later. The Chileans and the Argentinians were there. I think it was the Chilean Air Force and the Argentinian Navy maned the two bases. We got on very well with them; we got on better with the Chileans than the Argentinians. They were ok, they were very good. They had a doctor, and we didn't and on one occasion we had to take one of our chaps over there for the doctor to have a look at. In fact, he did an operation on him for his appendix, he had an appendix problem. That was big news in Argentina although nobody could get to the island in winter and no one could get out. It was completely isolated. They didn't have the aircraft in those days to fly in and out of a place like that. It was on the Argentinian news that their doctors were operating on a British scientist. Actual fact he was our radio operator. They actually did an operation on him and they couldn't find his appendix anyway [laughs] In fact, I've got a whole series of photographs somewhere of the operation. I didn't take them, one of the Argentinians took them. They did a good job on him apparently. They'd convinced him they'd taken out his appendix and he felt better for it. Eventually when the first boat came in, we told him that they hadn't taken his appendix out and he went up the wall a bit. He was a Scotsman and he got very annoyed. The fact of the matter was he'd got over it anyway. They felt that there had been a blockage in one of his intestines which they had broken up with their fingers. The doctor had broken it up with his fingers or massaged it, he thinks that it may have just been a slight blockage rather than appendicitis. They told him that they'd taken them out and he wanted to see them at one point, but they said that they'd thrown them away. It was lucky he was there really because otherwise we might have had a major problem. But they were very good all trying to help each other.

[0:22:36] McDermott: Their bases were a lot better than ours. They were equipped a lot better; they had generators that ran all day long 24 hours a day, ours didn't. They had meat on the hoof, they had fresh meat. They would take sheep and pigs down there. They took chickens down there and all these sorts of things. They just slowly killed them throughout the year. Kept them alive and obviously fed them and they had a sheep a week. For celebrations they had a pig. Power all day long, plenty of power which we didn't; we only had power for say 12 hours a day. And then we went onto batteries. Our heating was coal fires, very primitive in comparison to what they had; they had all central heating and radiators. They were quite modern compared to us. They had flush toilets and we didn't. Our toilet was a tin. When it was full you threw it away which I believe they don't do anymore. But in those days, they did. They used to refer to us as 'their impoverished brothers'. They reckoned that all the British were mad. We went down there because we wanted to go, they went down there because they were forced to go. It was a posting for them. It was the military saying, 'you're going to the Antarctic' and away they went. That was the difference between us. We wanted to be there, and they didn't. The Chileans were great guys. We had a lot of visits between the two bases. Not so much the Argentinians, they were a little bit further away, they were right across the other side of the island. In the summer it was all open sea, in the winter of course it was all frozen. In the winter you could walk, in the summer you had to go in a boat. We had some frights in those as well.

[0:24:49] Verdenius: Were you busy in the winter because you had planes on the ground, there was some repairing to be done?

McDermott: Oh yes but most of the time we did virtually nothing. When I say virtually nothing, you had to survive. There were no cooks, you had to do the cooking. There's nobody who's going to get water for you, you had to get the water, you had to look after yourself. You had to do the laundry, you had to do everything yourself. You had to do it. On that particular base we had a rota where we would do 3 days on cook, then we'd come off. There were 10 of us there in the winter. So, every 30 days or 27 days you got 3 days cook to do. And then you'd have 3 days what we called gash hand which is the man who does all the washing up and throws all the rubbish out and does the cooks assistant if you like. So you would do 3 days cook, 3 days gash, and then you're off it for the next 23 days. In those 23 days you'd do your own job, if you wanted to because it was fairly laid back. We know we had to do certain things over the winter, but we sort of spaced it out. Nothing colossal to do really. So, there was a lot of spare time

[0:26:07] Verdenius: What did you do with your spare time?

McDermott:

It depends, sometimes nothing. Sometimes nothing at all. Some guys could sleep for 24 hours. Others couldn't sleep at all. There was always something to do. You'd go for a bit of skiing. All my winters were spent at Deception because the aircraft were there. It was only summer that I went down further south onto the continent. There was always something to do; repairs to do to the hut or to whatever. Various projects, a lot of photography of course. Did quite a bit of photography in the evenings or during the day, it depends what you felt like. You could go out looking for a seal. We used to catch the odd seal to feed the dogs on. We didn't get many at Deception during the winter. We'd get one or two. You could go looking for a seal, you could go and visit the other bases if you wanted to. But in winter you had to watch for the weather. It was mostly dark throughout the day anyway so you couldn't do an awful lot outside. You may have 4 hours of twilight but there was always lots of things to do. It's amazing though you could keep yourself quite busy. There was always a lot of time on your hands as well. It's amazing really what you did do. It's only when you read through your diary really that certain things happened, certain things didn't, internal arguments. There was always somebody you weren't talking to. And somebody wasn't talking to you obviously in return. Situations get very strained at times. Some people you wouldn't talk to for weeks on end. And the reason for it was the fact that he poured salt on the dinner that you cooked for something. Some silly things a habit they had 'if he does it again, I'm going to hit him!' It's just human nature.

[0:28:18] McDermott: When you're confined 10 people on a base like that, the only time you would come together is mealtimes; the rest of the day you may not see them even though there's nowhere they can go really. The base at Deception was quite large, the hut was large. Unlike all our other bases it was an old whaling hut built by the Norwegians about the turn of the century and it was large. Very comfortable, it was a very comfortable hut really. It was much larger than most bases, so we had a lot more privacy than perhaps most of them did. It was very comfortable, although when the wind really started blowing it used to shake an awful lot. We used to think 'we've got 10 ton of flour in the roof upstairs, that was moving, is it going to come down at long last?' It never did, it was a good hut. Deception was a bit unusual because we also had the ruins of a whaling factory there. Quite large, a lot of great big tanks with holes in them and bits of ruins and the boilers and the ¹flensing area. It was a total ruin though obviously; it hadn't been worked for 50 years. But it was an interesting place and it had history

¹ Flensing is to strip the whale of its blubber or skin

to it. You're always turning up things; there are mountains of barrels, oak barrels for the whale oil and they were just dumped, they were left big mounds of them. There were tops and staves, they weren't put together they were just individual pieces. They must have had somebody down there making barrels out of all of these bits of wood. There were mounds of them and all these remains of the whaling period. It's quite interesting, you're always finding things with names written on them, obviously the ships that used to go there. I've seen a photograph of Deception Island with nearly 100 ships in it. Whale catchers and whalers, all sailing type, early steam ships, sail and steam, these sort of things. It must have been a very busy place at some time. It was a very interesting place. You think you're in the Antarctic but it's really like it used to be a city once upon a time.

[0:30:45] Verdenius: Did you write in your diaries about your flights?

McDermott: Oh yes, yes. I meant to bring them down. I will go and get them. This is one year. It's even got photographs this one. There's a list there of flights throughout the whole of my stay actually. Starting with the destination and so on and so forth. That was the aeroplane that actually did the heavy landing. You can see it's a bit lopsided. [pause] That was the end of that one. Most of our photography was in black and white simply because you could develop it there. There were some very good photographers down there. Mine's fairly amateurish compared. These were all developed and printed down there. 'An exceptionally hot day during which many of the lads got sunburnt'. When the weather was good you could really get sunburnt. 'Weather not too good early on for flying by lunchtime the aircraft was off down the Sound on the evacuation run' That was going down to a place called Fossil Bluff which was our furthest most base. Obviously, we were going to bring everybody back or started bringing people back on the evacuation run. 'Bill, who was the pilot, has put forward the idea of one mechanic staying down at the Bluff. There were two mechanics, two aircraft until we had ceased operations down there, and of course I was in full agreement of this plan mainly because I hadn't as yet got any photos of the Bluff'. So obviously I wanted to go down there and stay because I hadn't got any pictures of the place. I was quite keen on that. Bill, who was the senior pilot, was in charge of the whole air party. He would make whatever decisions were going. He was a Canadian incidentally, he's RAF, he was a Canadian, which was nothing to hold against him of course. The Antarctic affected him considerably. When he came back, he resigned his commission and took up religion, because he'd come to the conclusion while he was down there, although he was in

the RAF, he decided that he couldn't go to war in an aeroplane. You see it does affect people.

[0:34:17] Verdenius: Bill who is that?

McDermott: Bill Mills. He was a nice a guy, he was a real good guy. So, he decided that we were going to go down to the Bluff. 'I thought it only right to ask Hugh', Hugh was the second mechanic [REDACTED] 'to ask Hugh if he would like to go down there as he seemed keen to see the place. But I think the idea that he may have to sledge out should the aircraft go US didn't appeal too much to him. However, I suggested we could split the stay in two with him doing the first few days and me the last. The first trip today saw the return of sledge Alpha' which was obviously a sledging team coming home 'Willy and Julian from the Black Stump'. That's a place, one of the furthest most places that we ever reached when I was down there. The Black Stump is simply a great lump of black mountain sticking out of the ice. And so they were coming back together with the Huns. The Huns are the name of a team, dog team. 'The second flight to the Bluff this time would bring out Garrek Grikeroff [phonetic] who was a Russian, member of the Russian communist party on an interchange; we had somebody with them, and they had somebody with us.' Garrek Grikeroff, he was a geologist. He eventually became head of their entire Antarctic operations and his father was some musical conductor in the Moscow Orchestra or something

[0:35:56] Verdenius: Did he speak English?

McDermott: Yes, he spoke very good English

[0:36:00] Verdenius: Was he a good guy to get along with?

McDermott: Yes, oh yes, he was a good chap. He got on very well with all our people.

[0:36:08] Verdenius: Garrek Grikeroff?

McDermott: Garrek Grikeroff Yep. 'He was bringing Garrek Grikeroff out to Black Stonington'. It was a nickname, Stonington was the base, but we called it Black Stonington because everything was bad there. It wasn't really, it was just a joke. 'and a few odd lads here. Hugh went down on this flight and also Super who was another vehicle mechanic, tractor mechanic who is also going to Stonington. The aircraft arrived back here at about 1.30 with Dick Palmer, Tony Rider, Barry Armstrong, Roger Owen from Stonington. This load now brings the total on the base personnel up to 25' which was a lot for that particular base, they only had 16 beds, so most of them would be sleeping in tents. 'Hit the

sack about 2 o'clock but couldn't sleep because of the hound Dorset' that's one of the huskies, 'out the back kept yelping all night. Apparently, he has mange or something, but he'll get the boot if he doesn't stop tonight. The water system has been installed'. The water system was simply melting snow and ice running off the glaciers. We put pipes up and it was to collect it. Saved us carrying lumps of ice and putting them in the tank. So that was a big advantage if you were gash hand and you had to get all the water in. And so it goes on.

[0:37:44] Verdenius: This was another flight that we did on the 3rd which was aborted, we couldn't land. We were trying to get to the east coast of Graham Land which was always a major problem for us because all our bases were on the west coast of Adelaide. When the sledging parties used to go out, they used to climb up 2000 metres across the top of the plateaux which was about 5 or 6 metres wide, and then down the other side to the far side where they used to do a lot of survey work. It was also a tremendous slog to try and get a dog team up these 2000 metres and down the other side. And when you come back you've got to do it in reverse so it's a tremendous effort. Very rarely was the weather good enough, the aircraft to get over the other side to help them, in other words, to put in food, or even to take them over there. It was very rare; I think I only went over there in my three years I only got there about 4 times. With those aircraft it was very, very difficult. It was a major problem to get a fully loaded aeroplane up that high and across the top. This was one of those flights. We were going across there to try and put in a depot so that sledging teams would have another supply of food should they need it.

[0:39:05] Verdenius: It says here 'another wonderful warm and bright day which developed into a rather long flying session. Weather good down at the Bluff so Jules was soon airborne on his way down there with Alex Bottomley as co-pilot to help pack the meteorological instruments at the Bluff. With the aid of Dick Palmer, we then hauled the load of coal and Nutrigan, which was dog food, up the hill with the aid of the tractor winch but not before the sledge came off once and the winch pulley all but flew to pieces. At 2 o'clock the weather looked fine for the east coast trip to Churchill Peninsula to collect the rock specimens there. Bill and I went on this trip and all went well until we crossed the plateaux and met the blanket of cloud on the other side which seemed to continue without break to the north. However, we did fly as far as Cape Robinson before turning back on what was obviously a wasted trip. Sledge Bravo are only 30 miles south of Churchill now so they should reach it tonight if all goes well. We came back a slightly different route than usual; turned straight west at Cape Robinson, over the plateaux, down the

Drummond Glacier into Darbel Bay' There's an old, abandoned base at Darbel Bay, 'across Arrowsmith Peninsular and Day Island, up the Shambles Glacier onto Adelaide Island. A very nice route but unfortunately the light wasn't too good for the old photography. Flight lasted 2 hours 40 minutes. Another quick turn round and Reg set off for Bluff with a load of Coal and John Lee to fix up the radios down there'. So, you were virtually flying round the clock at this time of the year. As long as the weather holds, we could keep flying. And that's what we did; we would change pilot, change crew, off they'd go again. You'd put quite a few hours in and as long as the weather held, you'd keep flying. Usually, it didn't last more than a few hours, it would deteriorate. So, you'd obviously get a flight in, that's it for the day, for the week or whatever.

[0:41:11] Verdenius: How many flights would you do for a day?

McDermott: Well, you could keep going. I wouldn't do it. During the summer on this particular occasion, we had two complete air parties there. We had the new pilots who were coming in to take over, and the old pilots who were going out and we probably had the same with the mechanics. We probably had an extra mechanic as well. You could fly quite a lot. If the weather held you could fly right through because it didn't get dark enough to stop you flying. The weather was obviously too bad for me to take pictures, it was too dark to take reasonable pictures so obviously I didn't bother. We were still flying; you could still see where you were going. So as long as the weather held you just kept going.

[0:41:56] Verdenius: Even though it was about time to go to sleep for instance?

McDermott: You'd sleep when you could. The only time that really happened to us was when we were lost, and the aeroplane crashed. What had happened, in fact, was that the *John Biscoe* was coming down to relieve the base, in other words, bring more supplies in, had got stuck in the ice. It couldn't get there. I think for almost about a month it was stuck out in the ice. And it was getting later and later, and they were worried that they weren't going to reach the base with the ship. So, they decided what they would do, they would start offloading onto the ice. Because the ice was fairly good, the aircraft could fly from Adelaide, land alongside the ship and take on the supplies and fly them back to Adelaide. At that time, we were flying round the clock. Just head down, off they'd go, they'd come back, and you'd get up and go and meet them, and unload it. You would change, you would go off with them and so forth. It was flying round and round and round. And the aeroplane was actually returning from the ship and it had a full load. In fact, it was overloaded with 45-gallon drums, these great big

red drums of aviation fuel. It was really overloaded, and he thought he was down, closed his throttle, hit the ground and through came the legs. If it hadn't of been overloaded, it would probably have bounced but it was hopeless, it was hopeless. That was the end of that. That was really the only time that we really did that amount of flying. We were really pushing it to try and get as much in as possible. And we were all tired. And this is part of it really isn't it? It all adds up. You're pushing yourself and you're pushing the planes. As it was the ice did break up about a week later and the ship got in, so we wasted it really. It was a good exercise while it lasted. That's the way it goes. In fact, I was in bed when the thing crashed. I had my head down, someone came up and banged on the door. That's the base at Fossil Bluff, that's the hut we were going to close down. That's all it was, that was it.

[0:44:11] Verdenius: That was it?

McDermott: That was it, that was home.

[0:44:19] Verdenius: It's small?

McDermott: It's small yeah but it's very comfortable. These are all dog sledges on the roof. They're put up there, so you know where they are, they don't blow away. We're just about to secure the hut. There's not much snow there, because it's all melted away, it's all open rock. Julian's the pilot. Here's my pilot there. All three of them are what we call general assistants. They're mountaineers, they're rock climbers and they usually go out with the surveyor and dog teams. They do all the 'he' man stuff if you like. They do the camping, and they know all about the nature and the tents and the climbing and the ropes and the dogs. The surveyor does his surveying. But these guys are all general assistants. Two of them are very good mountaineers, very good mountaineers. Climbed some of the highest mountains in the world. They didn't look like it but they did, they were good. Members of the Creagh Dhu Climbing Club, a Scottish climbing club. I'd obviously gone down to the Bluff and we were going to be the last flight out. We would actually close the hut up, secure it completely. Every time you leave a hut like that it's left completely secure; all the food's in there, it's all cleaned, the chimneys are secured, there's coal left in there ready for the fire. If somebody gets there, they can actually light up a fire, they could actually survive very easily. Instructions were left on how to light the fire, where to find the coal, where to find the food. All these sorts of things, how to operate the radio, how to start the generator. There was a small generator there. All these things were left written just in case; you never know who's going to drop in. That was the system through every base, every hut that was left, it was left like that. Unfortunately,

some of the old huts and old bases were visited by other people who didn't think quite as much, and they would vandalise them which was a great shame. They'd leave a door open and things like this. It could be life and death for somebody.

[0:46:22] Verdenius: Who'd go there?

McDermott: Chileans and Argentinians, all sorts of people. You'd get the odd ship down there. If they're not Survey members, then they would not worry too much about it. They'll obviously take what they want, they'll steal what they want. It's a shame really. This one, nobody could really get to it. As I said it was about 150 miles from the sea or something like that. The only people that were going to go there would be our people I should think. That's our coal supply. These are all Adelaide Island. There's a coal supply there, and there's a seal supply there. A big bunch of seals look. Mr Dick Palmer, he was a Royal Engineer's Corporal tractor mechanic, he used to look after the tractors. Doesn't look like an explorer, does he? Once again Julian Britt, the pilot. Sandy Muir, the doctor. We didn't have too many doctors. Brian Pym-Smith, he was a meteorologist. I have to think about it now, it's getting too old. You forget their names; you forget their names.

[0:48:02] Verdenius: That's why the diary is good

McDermott: That's right, that's right. This is the only one I put photographs in. Obviously, it's the only one that is big enough to put photographs in. It's quite useful. These were issued. Believe it or not these were actually issued by BAS as diaries.

[0:48:22] Verdenius: Didn't you tell me that BAS encouraged you to take (...)

McDermott: Yes, to keep a diary. This was given to me by BAS and they encouraged you to keep a diary. There's a couple of interesting machines. That was our main tractor the Muskeg and that was an unusual thing, that was a Lancing snow mobile; like an alien machine driven by an aeroplane engine. You can see the propeller at the back. It was just like a sledge with an aeroplane thing on. Unfortunately, it didn't have any brakes. So, once you got going unless you turned uphill, you wouldn't stop. [laughs] It was very hairy. It really was very, very dangerous it really was. We had some very good trips on it about 70 or 80 miles an hour in that. [laughs]

[0:49:06] Verdenius: 80 miles?

McDermott: Yea. An hour [laughs] It was almost flying! No brakes. It eventually got blown into the sea and destroyed. But it was a bit of a failure down there, it wasn't much good. I had two weeks holiday with that just

driving all over Adelaide island which is about 100 miles long so we had good fun with that.

[0:49:34] Verdenius: Can you look that up in the diary, that holiday?

McDermott: That particular time? It could take me a while to find it. It must have been then. 'The weather was fine and so I was up early and packed my rucksack. After a quick breakfast Willie', who was general assistant and mountaineering type, he looked after that machine. 'Willie and I went up to the Lansing and took off for Snake Pass. The surface was quite good and in some places we were doing 50 mile an hour. Very exhilarating. Very few crevasses about, or at least very few we saw because you were going so fast you jumped over them' [laughs] Quite often you could go across a crevasse and it wouldn't open until you'd gone over it. With a tractor, you'd obviously be going much slower, and as you got to it the ground would give way, the crevasse would give way or the bridge would give way, hopefully it wasn't very big. Invariably you'd crawl out the other side. But with this thing, it was going so fast it would just literally fly over them. It was quite good. 'Very few crevasses about or at least very few we saw. Nice scenery going past Mount Gaudry and we stopped just in front and below Lincoln depot', that was a depot put in by the Muskeg tractors, 'to refuel. From there it was a more or less straight run to Snake ridge, but it took considerable time although we seemed to be going quite fast. Just as we reached the camp the aircraft shot overhead' obviously the aircraft was going to come out to see us, 'the aircraft shot overhead and so the lads had some good pictures of what seemed to be a race'. The people we were going to meet saw the Lansing coming along on the ground and the aircraft coming through the air. 'Our time 2 hours 20 minutes. Willie and I soon had our tent up and our gear inside. Hugh put up his equipment on the aircraft as he is now returning to base. Aircraft left shortly afterwards as the lads had only just got up', they must have been sleeping most of the day. 'We had some breakfast in Jimmy and Davey's tent'. Those were the two guys that we were visiting. It's those 2 guys there look. They were the two general assistants at the other place, that was in their tent, Jimmy and Davey. What they were going to do was to try and climb Mount Gaudry, that's what we had gone for, I remember now. Mount Gaudry is quite high, it's about 10,000 feet, what's that in metres, 3000 metres. It's a fair old mountain. At that time it had been climbed before but they got stuck up there and the Navy had to go and get them off with a helicopter. Luckily, the Navy were in the area at that particular time.

[0:52:58] McDermott: Willie and Davey and Jimmy were going to try and climb it. 'We did some work after lunch, Davey, Roger and Barry going up to the survey

cairn behind the camp'. We were doing a bit of surveying as well 'Jimmy went out with his dogs on the Piedmont heighting, and Willie and I went out on the same job with the Lansing. So, we're doing a survey marking points, heights of the Piedmont as the ice slopes away, we're actually doing a survey of it. One dog team was doing one side and we were with the Lansing, were doing the other side. 'We went straight down towards the coast stopping every mile or so to take barometric and compass readings. Stopping about a mile short of the coast approximately we turned south for a mile and then came back into the camp. The trip took 2 hours 30 minutes. Willie tried the heater on the way back and we were nearly asphyxiated by the fumes' So that didn't work. 'After [incomprehensible] the 3 climbers decided to climb Mount Bouvier behind us and chalk up another Antarctic first' Obviously Mount Bouvier hadn't been climbed at that particular point and they were going to try and do that. This was quite late at night actually. 'They set off from here at about eleven in the evening' Once again this is daylight, although it's dark, it's daylight. The reason why they want to go in the evening is because it's cold and if there's any avalanches they tend to freeze. 'But it seemed to be manking in from the north' other words the weather was deteriorating, 'at about 3 I was woken when Willie came in the tent cursing the weather as they were 2/3rds of the way up and they had to return' So they didn't get there. I think they did it a couple of days later, I can't remember. 'A day of mank' bad weather, 'which prevented us doing any work. Woke up sometime about midday and had breakfast of Corn Flakes and biscuits. We dosed for several hours and then went across to the twins tent and sat in there for the rest of the day chatting away between brew ups. And that was about all that happened. Hit the sack about 2 in the morning' You lose all track of time; time just changes when it's daylight all the time. You just do things to suit yourself. It's very strange. 'Crawled out of our pits at midday again. Once again spent the afternoon snoozing, reading, chatting in Jimmy's tent. The weather was reasonably fine but the surface was quite soft so we postponed any travel until after the freeze at night' Before you start moving you wait till it gets so cold the surface gets cold and you can travel better.

[0:56:08] McDermott: I couldn't see because I'd be on the floor with my back against the wall like this and my feet up pushed against the sack and the doors banging open and closed. Then when Julian dropped his hand up, kicked the sack and out it would go. It was quite good fun really.

[0:56:28] Verdenius: Did you see the sack hitting the ground?

McDermott: No, no, once it had gone, I was getting the next one ready and Julian was banking round coming round the other way for the next one. We

had radio contact with them, and they were 'who's silly (...)' At least they got a sack of coal didn't they. And most of the stuff they retrieved, a few went into the sea but most of the stuff they got. I even dropped them a bottle of scotch. I took it out of the bottle of scotch and put it into one of these rubber water bottles, a hot water bottle for the bed and put it one of those. In fact, I put two in there and they got that as well. It tasted a bit rubbery, but it was alright. Best they had to drink anyway [laughs] We used to drop them loaves of bread and all sorts of things. We had to make the bread first of course. If I wasn't on cook and we knew we were going there the next day, I used to make a bread bake just for them because otherwise the other people would eat it. [pause]

[0:57:45] McDermott: Let's have a look 'as there was no flying, we potted about preparing a load for the east coast' Once again we were still trying to get to the east coast. 'The weather turned very nice and Jules decided to do a trip to Detaille Island. We had quite a lot of trouble getting the machine moving as the surface was like glue and in fact, we had to use the tow bar' So in other words, the aeroplane, although it was on skis, it was so wet, obviously it was very warm, this was October 4th, it must have been so warm that the sun had softened the top up and the skis tend to stick into the surface. So, we must have used the tractor to pull it, just to break the adhesion and then it would usually go. 'Not a very nice trip as it was very bumpy all the way and although it doesn't worry me, I don't like to think what it does to the aeroplane. Roger and Mike came for the ride, it was exceptionally rough round Detaille Island' Once again it was in a deep valley this little island and the wind used to howl through it. So, when you were doing these sorts of drops, the aeroplane's really bouncing, quite hairy. 'It was exceptionally rough around Detaille Island and we had to do the drop from quite high in the process of which the gin was smashed' So we must have dropped the bottle of gin. 'Roger gave me a hand to get the Nutrigan clear and I was surprised at the speed we got it out the door. Looking at the surrounding ice I don't think the lads will be off Detaille until the boats are down in the area. So, I suppose we shall be doing some more drops to them. A very quiet evening which wasn't long as we didn't finish at the aircraft depot until after 7 o'clock. All set for the east coast tomorrow if the weather holds and although the wind seems to be rising now the fresh sea ice is still with us but there are some long leads in it. Next day it was gale force winds all day prevented any flying. I went up to the aircraft in the Muskeg' which is a tractor 'and took a few photographs of 377', which is the one that had been damaged, broken, 'in the drift snow and to see how 294 was fairing. The rest of the day I went lounging about reading and looking through some technical books. Listened to a few BBC records in the evening and that was all'

We had a number of BBC records sent down to us, there was various shows and comedy programmes and things like that which were quite good.

[1:00:34] Verdenius: You took books along on your sledging tours?

McDermott: Sometimes. I didn't bother because I was never really sledging for any period of time. Yea we did take books. Those guys could be away for 3 or 4 months at a time, so they did take a couple of books with them usually. You could get a really bad storm and you could be stuck in a tent for almost 2 weeks. And you just couldn't go anywhere.

[1:01:09] Verdenius: What was your worst flight?

McDermott: The worst one. Well, it's probably when we got lost, and we eventually landed at Stonington Island. See if I can find out the date. It should be in this one. It'll be one of my last lot anyway. [pause] One of the worst was our trip from Deception to Argentine was the longest trip we ever did. It was about 4 hours and to do it we had to carry a very large fuel tank in the back of the aeroplane, in the passenger compartment, to give us enough fuel to get to Adelaide and if the weather camped in there, we'd have to fly back to Deception. So, we had to have enough fuel for at least 8 hours flying. With a single engine job, it's a long time, so we used to carry an awful lot of fuel. On the last trip, this was the first time we'd flown with one aeroplane. On our last trip south, the last summer, there's just Julian and myself in the aeroplane and all this fuel, we got caught in the middle. We got down as far as Adelaide Island and the weather closed in there. We turned round to go back to Deception, and it closed in there as well and that was real fear that was, because we just had nowhere to go. There was a base in the middle, a place called Argentine Islands and that was a very small island like Detalle surrounded by water. Obviously, this time of the year it was frozen, but the last aeroplane that landed there sank through the ice and obviously they said, 'don't land there'. But for us there was no choice, we had to. If we didn't get down there we were going to get down nowhere. Let's see what it says, 28th and 29th. That was one of the worst trips. I got out of the aeroplane; I was thinking I was going to be swallowed up. I don't think I've got it. [pause] That year I had 2 diaries, I had 2 of these things, I used both of them. I haven't got it I'm afraid. I did virtually nothing '65. That was my last year, so I didn't record it at all. So, I haven't recorded that in the diary I am afraid. Just the flight

[1:05:18] Verdenius: But you landed on the ice?

McDermott:

We landed on the ice. What we did, we overflowed the base. We had a look at the site. They had a dog team there and some small skidoos, snow mobiles, like motorbikes. We overflowed the base and we said to them 'we're going to have to land here. Somehow we're going to have to land'. We said 'go out onto the ice. Tell us the thickness, how thick it is'. They came back and said it's about a metre or something like this, I can't remember now. So, we said 'right mark us out a runway. Pick us the flattest area'. Because you've got lumps of ice and things all stuck in this frozen sea. They marked it out for us. A couple of dog teams, a few cans of oil and things. We came in and landed on that. It was a perfect landing, it was great. We spent about 3 days there and then the weather cleared, and Julian said, 'shall we try and get off?' This time the skis had sunk into the ice and they were about 6 inches deep in ice. So, we had to chip them out. The whole surface of the area was melting, and it was very slushy, and the aeroplane was very heavy. We didn't really know what to do about it. So I said 'have you got any timber on the base, wood, spare planks?' They got all the timber they had, spare planks, we took them out and the aircraft had wheels and skis so you could go from wheels or skis which ever you wanted. Most of the time we were on skis. So, what I did, I put some boards under the wheels; we jacked them onto wheels, so the skis were up in the air. We cleaned all underneath the skis and I put all the timber out like a runway, two long bits of timber in front of the wheels on all this soft snow. We decided that we'd start on wheels and by the time we hit the end of the planks, we got to go onto skis; drop it off the wheels onto skis otherwise it would just go onto its nose; just drop off the end and dig over. And that's what we did. I operated the skis, Julian had it on full power. He was operating the throttle and I operated the skis. We held it on full power, took the brakes off and away it went, and as it dropped off the end of the wood, we dropped it onto the skis and it almost stopped but it just kept going, it just kept going. We were almost like water skiing then. We took I should think about a mile to get off the ground. It was going up and down like this, we thought it was going to go right over. Any minute it was going to go right over but it didn't. Eventually it just lifted off and off it went, and we got away. We never went back there again. So, we got off and that's how we got down to Adelaide Island eventually. If it had stayed there it would have gone through the ice and disappeared like the others two years earlier. We got there anyway.

[1:08:28] McDermott: Once again that was frightening before we landed because you just don't know are you going to get down. It's a very lonely place when you're like that. It's like you see in these films, these movies no where to go in an airliner and the weather's getting bad and they can't land.

So, we had a 3-day holiday at Argentine Islands which was not scheduled but we got there. I don't know where the other one is, it may have been the following year. It must have been, that's right. It's all '65 this one. All my really hairy trips were in the last year, mainly that was because we only had one aeroplane. All the others we had two aeroplanes, so they were fairly good. [pause] That's quite interesting; that's a letter from the guy who had the operation. I'd left before the ship came in because we flew south with the air party. He stayed at Deception Island; he was a very good friend of mine actually. He wrote me this letter before he was going home fairly early, I never actually saw him again after that. He was going home, and he sent this letter on down with the boat. He sent me a whole set of photographs from the operation that he had when they took his appendix out or didn't take his appendix out. It says here 'now that you have looked through these poor copies of my operation shots, you'd be wishing that you had not asked for a set of them to be sent down. Quite frankly I don't understand why you would want these however you've got them for what they're worth'. So obviously I must have asked him for them. He goes onto tell me 'things have changed quite drastically just recently. I'm referring of course to the base personnel. Since the departure of our beloved diesel mechanic and Hugh, life has become more tolerable and enjoyable'. Hugh was the other aircraft mechanic [REDACTED] and as soon as the boats came in, he went back to the UK, back home on the boats. 'Our new mech is a young lad of 21 or 22 named Jones, an extremely decent bloke he is unlike his predecessor'. Obviously, you get likes and dislikes. 'He likes servicing and generally keeping busy which means stacks of power'. In other words, the guy he was talking about who left was a diesel mechanic who didn't like looking after diesel engines. In fact, I did them on one occasion for him; a bit of servicing on them. I thought he was going to say something about the fact that he didn't know when I left that he hadn't had the operation or he hadn't had his appendix removed but he didn't mention it there, I thought he did. Anyway, I never saw him again.

[1:12:14] Verdenius: You'll meet him again someday?

McDermott: Well, that's it. I have met a few of them again at reunions. I haven't been to a reunion for 17 years now, but they do have them every year. If you feel that way inclined, you can go and probably meet at least one person that you know. In the last 30 years there's been an awful lot of people down there, so it's not as it was. Of course, a few of them have passed on, a few have died. That was the guy, Bill Geddes, that chap there, he was the radio operator who had his appendix out. That was Hugh [REDACTED], that's myself and Julian. This

was the wintering party of Deception Island that particular year. You can see all the tyres in the background look, somebody's whiskers look, somebody's hair there hanging up.

[1:13:20] Verdenius: Shall we have a look at these films?

McDermott: Do you want to have a look at these films then?

[1:13:24] Verdenius: Yea

McDermott: OK

[1:13:33] <ENDS>

Possible Extracts:

- Storing the aeroplanes in the winter [0:08:55]
- Swapping the fuel tanks during flight! [0:13:35]
- The appendix operation that never was [0:19:50]
- BAS bases compared to Chilean and Argentinian bases [0:22:36]
- Life on base during the winter [0:24:49]
- The ruins of the whaling factory at Deception Island [0:28:18]
- Story of the aborted flight [0:37:44]
- Story of the plane crash [0:41:56]
- Extracts from diary on 2-week holiday in Adelaide Island [0:49:34]
- Difficult flight to Argentine islands [1:01:09]
- Landing on the ice and trouble taking off again [1:05:18]