

ARTHUR MARTIN 2

Edited transcript of interview with Arthur Martin, interviewed by Jaap Verdenius in 1993.
BAS archives AD6/24/3/27. Transcribed by Allan Wearden in January, 2020.

[0:00:00] Verdenius: Right. You should tell me when you first got interested in the Antarctic.

Martin: I suppose it's one of those childhood memories of men challenging the cold and the blizzards and really I suppose living with the memories of Scott and his team. That perhaps started it in my childhood days, and then later in life I had the opportunity to join fulltime the Scout Association as the purser on the Royal Research Ship *Discovery*, which was Captain Scott's ship! And so that began sort of to bring together those childhood fantasies if you like, of this great man and the team of people, and through that I began to meet other explorers who came to the ship from time to time, and the public who came because the ship was open to the public during the day. And part of my job on board the ship was to conduct parties of schoolchildren around the ship and tell them about Scott and the Antarctic, and I was often amused by young children used to say to me 'What was it like with Captain Scott!?' and here I was a 25 year old [laughter] young man and I thought my age had been preserved very well over the years! And then in 1952 Sir Miles Clifford, who was then the Governor of the Falkland Islands and the Dependences, offered to the Scout Association two places for two leaders to join a relief expedition, and it was advertised in our national magazine and I thought 'This is my chance to see it first hand', to gain that experience and then to speak from that experience when people came aboard. So I applied along with an Australian who happened to be living on the ship at that time, and we were both lucky and we were both selected to go and that's really how that adventure sort of crystallised itself and began in October '52, when we sailed from Southampton on the old *John Biscoe*.

[0:03:09] Verdenius: What made the appeal of Scott so big?

Martin: I think the endurance and the team work of that team of men who pulled the sledges, and used the dogs till the time had come go, and that struggle back and the disappointment, as one has disappointments in life anyway, it must have been a terrible disappointment to actually reach the Pole and then to see the Norwegian flag fluttering as you got near of it! It must have been terrible, like hitting someone right in the middle of the stomach to him, and then to have to struggle all the way back and one by one people fell by the wayside until they all just curled up and froze to death! But that bond, I suspect that bond of people together tackling the unknown and remaining together and supporting each other in order to try and achieve that task, a goal if you like, something to be achieved. And I met his son, and Peter Scott, Peter Scott's daughter was christened onboard the *Discovery* in my day, in the ship's bell as a font! So there was this connection and again of father/son and all the work that Peter did in wildlife and preservation and again of some of the loveliest things in the world of birds and nature! [Laughter]

[0:05:17] Verdenius: Do you remember your first impression of going there and arriving there?

Martin: Yes, it I suppose it began 2/3 days out of the Falklands when we began to see brash ice, and as we went further south, it then turned into pan ice and ice bergs became visible and these were new to my eyes and the bigger they got more fascinating they became! Until we got to...(where did we find ourselves first of all?), Signy Island, I think we called in at Signy Island to offload stores and personnel and then moved down into the Admiralty Islands, Base G, and again we were beginning to see islands with...small mountains peeking out the tops of the ice floes and glaciers and so forth. And on to this Base B which was Deception Island, which was fascinating really. Here was this volcano which had come out of the water, and one side there was this narrow channel with just enough to get a ship through into this whole interior where there were three Antarctic bases! We had one, the British, and the Argentinians had one and the Chileans had one, and it will give you the idea of the size of the inside of the volcano, and the beaches were steaming with sulphur and the water was quite hot on the edges of the shore. Yes that, that was quite fascinating, and we did some climbing up to the top to have a look down get a better aerial view. Yes, it was like a ginormous harbour inside, with a number of ships of various countries offloading as they would in the summer replenishing bases, and we left men there and went on again.

[0:08:16] Martin: To Hope Bay on top of the Graham Land Peninsula to offload there and that was fascinating too, this sort of I suppose it must have been about a 1000 feet haul up of stores, but they had a good team there so they did a lot that way but it was not so easy to get the stores off the boats on to the shore, which meant quite a lot of people having to get wet, down the bottom halves of themselves! But I think one of the fascinating things that I learned at Hope Bay was to recognize what's inside wooden crates; you soon pick up and know that what looks a big crate is actually a very light load and you discover quite quickly that's where corn flakes are housed, which is a huge crate and actually is quite light!

[Laughter] So one learns as one handles stores the heavy, the light, in this mode of operation but it's again fascinating turn around in a few days of offloading, 18 months to 2 years of provisions replenishment, provisions and additional provisions. Putting men ashore taking off men who've been there for a year or two years to come back into almost a different set of human beings, which they wouldn't have known anyway, again to create new group situations building again new relationships! And having to take part in the same operation at the next base you didn't get out of it! [Laughter] Every base you went to, this whole process of this teamwork of getting offloaded had to go because of the tight schedule.

[0:10:27] Verdenius: And you told me basically you spent your time in Antarctica at Port Lockroy.

Martin: Yes, which was Base A, which is off the west coast of the Graham Land Peninsula just above the Antarctic Circle, and it's a small outcrop of rock in a bay and it's sheltered by Wiencke Island and Doumer and Anvers Island. And it's one of those bays which is a haven for ships in very stormy conditions, it's a natural harbour and in fact, again, one of the interesting things was on the Royal Research Ship *Discovery*, we sold postcards of the ship in

the Antarctic with a background of a great mountain range and nobody seemed to be able to tell me where this was. And there behold me [laughter] as I arrived at Port Lockroy I recognized this mountain range and the ship was there in 1920 anchored, and later on we found it painted on one the big boulders, to say that ship had been there which again was a joy. At last I'd discovered where the ship was in this postcard [laughter] and it hadn't, true it had other interesting things because there was a Lieutenant Commander Marr, he was known as Scout Marr because he was a scouting man too, but he was there with an expedition, and he almost lost his life on Wiencke Island by an avalanche! And later, or in the spring of my year there, three of us decided that we should make an expedition although we weren't equipped for it and although we shouldn't have done it! [laughter] We were determined that we'd had enough of life on the base and we should go out and have a night out anyway, and so we went up on to the ice glacier on Wiencke Island with our six foot man-haul sledge having practised building igloos, and when we got to a 1000 feet up on the glacier, we discovered the snow was not the same condition as it was down at base and it just wouldn't hold! [Laughter] So the idea of the igloo disappeared and we thought 'Well lets dig a hole', and we piled all our skis and our sledge, ski sticks as rafters and cut blocks on put them on the top to make a roof and dug a tunnel and crawled in for the night, so we had our night out on the glacier! At the same time I was still doing met observations, I was still able to do that; we had the radio operator with us he was able to radio it back into base, and one of the other members of the team was able to send it through to Port Stanley in the normal way so the whole base procedure carried on. We left two men behind and three of us went away; we got our knuckles rapped for doing so, [laughter], but it was worth it, it was good to be up on the glacier for a night!

[0:14:33] Verdenius: What did the regular day look like for you?

Martin: Oh my regular day was somewhat timetabled to met obs. I originally said I wanted to go as a met observer because I was interested in met in my Scouting interests. And when I got to Port Stanley the Secretary FIDS said 'We're going to give you something different to do, we're going to put you on a six week course here in Stanley while the ship makes its first run south so that you can learn a bit about Ionospherics. So anyway to cut a long story short I got them to agree for me to do four met obs a day every six hours, and so my day was timetabled with six-twelve-six and midnight every day of the year while I was there! [Laughter] So I had a discipline on that which was no bad thing in a way, and in addition to that I was responsible for developing some 40 feet of film every day, which recorded the storm and the frequencies of the ionosphere from this great piece of machinery that swam into operation five minutes to the hour every day, and when that was done I was to decode it and prepare it for the wireless transmitter push it on to Stanley and then on to South America which was the collecting station for all around the world. So that was my two main work tasks, with an addition called the 'ice survey'. Part of that was to keep a check on the movement of ice and ice bergs in the bay or on the edge of the bay in the open channel, and record that, so that I had three main tasks as it were as far as the base work was concerned. And then in addition we all had to take part in a week's cooking, so every five weeks one's duty of cooking for the base came round and that again was, quite a challenge, because the

importance of enjoying your food and to have it well prepared and different week after week was quite a challenge!

[0:17:38] Verdenius: How much of cooking were you into?

Martin: Well I, again I have to go back to my scouting days, I was interested in cooking, I got my cook's badge! My mother was a professional cook so perhaps I inherited a love of cooking from her, so I had an interest in cooking, but again you're confronted with what is a limited variety in the larder! [Laughter] From dehydrated and tinned to the times of the year when there is fresh meat and that, which is seal, penguin or the blue eyed shag and that when it's available makes the world of difference to the diet during the course of the week. So, yes one tried to outdo the other one, tried to introduce something new each time that one's on! And of course you had to put up with some monotony with the routine collect of tins and the dehydrated foods that were available.

[0:18:53] Verdenius: Did you succeed?

Martin: Yes! Well I think so. If one succeeds one I think has to look the harmony of the base and that said something about people are contented with what they have in the way of friendship, in the way of food, in the way of the social aspects of life! And I said to somebody the other day 'If you can say you can go through a year with five people cooped up in that condition, and only have one real disagreement you've done very well!' And we had somebody who got heated one night and went out and slammed the door, but in two hours he was back and we decided we must have a party to celebrate that! [Laughter] And that was fine and really that was the only disagreement, real flare up, that happened. I can't actually remember what happened but it just happened he'd obviously got touched by something and exploded and went out! [Laughter] But, yes...I think he was...I look back and think why didn't people...get drunk, because there was wine and spirits and some beer and there was a ration every week and we had a cupboard, we didn't ration it we just stacked up the cupboard and it was there, if you wanted it you could just go and get it! But sometimes a week nobody had a drink, it was there but nobody seemed to bother with it. Perhaps that was one of the joys of harmony, the freedom and discipline from oneself was if you wanted a drink you had one so fair enough! But I do remember on one occasion we, I think it must have been after that disturbance we had, we said we'd have a party and I think we all had a bit too much to drink - in fact I put three of them to bed! [Laughter], and... having put three to bed I myself began to feel a little bit dizzy so I went to bed as well! But I had to remember too I had to be up for 6 o'clock in the morning [laughter] and how I got up to read that Stevenson screen I shall never know, it was quite an effort, but it had to be done and that was it! But yes, I think that friendship that was there was a great deal to the success of the harmony of the base and five quite different people, really quite different people.

[0:22:00] Verdenius: Apart from this one occasion you never got drunk?

Martin: No that was the only time, it's the only time in my life I've ever had too much to drink! [Laughter]

[0:22:12] Verdenius: What did you do in your spare time?

Martin: In spare time, one would say, 'What did you do in your spare time when you've done the work that you have to do', and there's quite a lot of recording and writing up and that, I suppose yes one writes letters although you can't post them. I wrote letters to friends like everybody else we listened to music which again is one of those delightful things that you either like some type of music or you don't. And we had a gramophone on the base and the diesel electrical mechanic had some records sent down from Stanley when the ship went there, and I can always remember there was this Mozart clarinet concerto which he enjoyed enormously, the fact if it was playing once a day that was a minimum, and more often not it was five, six or seven times during the course of the day. One or two were not too keen on the Mozart, but within the course of a month or so you could hear most people humming or whistling the melodies of the clarinet concerto! So things can grow on you [laughter] if you...take them in and not worry about them but enjoy what you have, yes! When light was there we could actually get out and do a bit of skiing on the island, that was a form of exercise, and in addition daily somebody had to go out and cut snow blocks to melt down for water, and then there's the cleanliness of the base which we all had to take a share in and so at least once a week there was what's known as a scrub out routine and everybody had a role, and the roles changed about from week to week and that kept the base in very good clean condition. And there was one's laundry to do - you can't go on week after week sweating out without changing underclothes and pyjamas and whatever, so there was that and the ironing, repairs make and mend, so there was always a lot to do. I found there was never a great deal of what I call wasted time! One read. One of the other jobs I got landed with, two jobs strangely enough, the first day after the relief ship had gone the Base Leader said to me 'I believe you were a Scout?' and so I said 'Well yes that's right', and he said 'Well you must know something about first aid', so I said 'Yes I do, I have got an ambulance badge', he said 'Right, you're the base first aider'!

[0:25:41] Martin: So he said 'There's your medical kit on the floor there'. a huge great big medical chest there. So I lifted the lid and there on the top in a tray was a whole set of dentist implements! [Loud laughter] I gasped at that and I lifted that out, and the second tray was a whole range of surgical instruments [laughter]. I thought 'What have I let myself in for?', and below there was all kinds of medication and so forth, but fortunately I didn't have to carve anybody up or extract any teeth - not human teeth anyway! So that was always in the back of my mind, 'What if we have appendicitis, what am I going to do and how I'm I going to cope with that', but fortunately enough it didn't! Only two medical things that I had really to do with and I didn't actually need anything out of the first aid kit, and this will probably amuse you. One was an inspection lamp as the Base Leader discovered, well we discovered he had piles! So [laughter] I had to look at that and then to get the necessary medication from the doctor at Hope Bay.

[0:27:05] Verdenius: What?

Martin: Piles the bottom bit, you get it damp and it irritates and bleeds sometimes, yes, hormones and things. Anyway that was cleared up reasonably but no surgical instruments!

[Laughter] And the second one really was somebody had gone to the loo and got his John Thomas too near to the bucket and it stuck, and I needed a blow lamp [laughter] to warm the bucket to free him! [Laughter] So that was the only two real flesh.

[0:27:46] Verdenius: So too cold?

Martin: John Thomas?

[0:27:49] Verdenius: It was too cold?

Martin: Oh too cold yes. Skin touching metal just grips it and holds it, [laughter], he should have sat further back!

[0:28:07] Verdenius: But you never had, nothing to do?

Martin: Nothing to do?

[0:28:15] Verdenius: There was no any times that you had?

Martin: Oh, what idle?

[0:28:20] Verdenius: Idle yes.

Martin: Idle, no I don't think one was ever idle and again I think that was one of the important factors in those conditions that there is always something to be done. and that leaves one's mind occupied with the job on hand. We had work to, do we had our lives to make comfortable and to live the best that we could do i. I suppose the other thing we used to occasionally while away together, well some of us anyway, we used to with the radio operator be in touch with some of the other Antarctic bases, and indeed chess was played from base to base. You had a chess match and on Midwinter's day the 21st of June there was usually a round robin and there was a little bit of entertainment from one base to another, everybody listening in to the contributions being made from base to base. So there was a lot of camaraderie going on between bases even though they were some hundreds of miles apart, but all good stuff yes! Yes, again the skiing was new to me but never the less I spent a lot of my time on my bottom rather than on my feet, but eventually I enjoyed the bit of skiing that I actually did! And then when spring came the penguins returned, the seals came back in the bay and it was good to watch the penguins build their nest and have their young and all that went on around of that.

[0:30:20] Verdenius: Can you tell me about the optical phenomenon?

Martin: Ah yes. this optical phenomenon. We'd had a gale raging for a good 12 hours or more and I had to go and do my midnight met ob, and I'd read the Stevenson screen and I was about to turn to go back into the base tunnel and I strolled down and there over Wiencke Island was this optical phenomenon o f what appeared to be almost a purple background, a backcloth of purple,...this light which almost looked like Christ on a cross, and I really stood just still and watched this phenomenon for five minutes or so, and I've never quite seen, I'd seen some optical phenomenon during the year with the coronas and what appeared to be

small suns on the edges, but this I've never seen this sort of setting before and I couldn't help thinking to me was something special! Perhaps this was one of probably two occasions in my life when I've felt quite close to God, my God! And it was quite outstanding, it really was quite outstanding, and it's lived with me all my life. And the other one was high in the mountains in Norway, in Arctic Norway. Again it was the peace and tranquillity and the nature gripping this powerful human, this being which was above all things! And one goes on searching for other occasions, but two occasions really and that was certainly the most impressive one that ever touched me in my life!

[0:33:03] Verdenius: This is the main feature of the country for you, this tranquillity?

Martin: Yes, I think that it has a peace of its own, it has a rage of its own...it has, well it has its seasons like everywhere really but it has...rather I suppose like a sailor at sea, you can imagine one of the lone sailors out on the oceans all on his own with nothing, nobody, just in solitude dependent on the strength of the wind, and the howl of the wind. But in a calm, there he is beset by calm and this is the same in the Antarctic and this solitude of this majestic scenery of perfect peace! In today's modern world of rush and tear of noise, absolutely stupendous really!

[0:34:20] Verdenius: On the other hand you witnessed the various changing patterns of the weather and the weather conditions?

Martin: Yes, it's surprising how quickly weather can change and people have been caught out by the rapid change in weather, and particularly in mountain regions where you can't see what's on the other side of the mountain, whipping up and coming over the top and blowing through channels and so forth. Yes, from what can be reasonably calm but in about 20 minutes or so you can have a gale raging 90/100 mph gusts and you have to be alert, to that to know what to do particularly if you have got a sledging base, to make sure that you have got your sledges upsides down with the handles in the snow, otherwise you're likely to lose them, I mean carried away on the skis..But the year after I came out from Lockroy we had a chap there who'd been out in a boat with another fellow, and they were offloading some of the canvas they had got in the boat when suddenly this wind came up, and one got out on to the ice and the other one was swept out across the bay and he tried as much as he did with the oars to keep into the shore, but he became exhausted and went to sleep in the boat, and fortunately for him it went down the channel and he drifted round back into the channel round the other side of the island, and when he woke up he suddenly realised where he was, but he was a long way from base! And so he had this trek back over the top of Wiencke, round to the hard and into the bay then down again, and suffered with frost bitten feet, lost one or two toes I think! And so, you always have to be prepared to almost go into action to combat a weather condition, but again you see even in the summertime you can get the occasional calm when the temperature rockets up and you can, well you can strip off because there's no one to worry you there, you can strip off and sunbathe if there's no wind and you can get a slight tan on you - which is the other extreme from the bitter cold of -47 or even below, but a cold which is, again, is different to the cold that we know in this country; it's a dry crisp cold much different.

[0:37:34] Verdenius: But how does this...this changing, constantly changing conditions of the environment, fit in with your idea of peace?

Martin: Well I suppose there is, there is this peace and tranquil soundness if you like. One aspect of it the other one is, say, the hum, the tone, the whistle of wind and gale force wind and vibration, which says there is a force there which is stronger than man. Again, this is coming back to forces beyond mans' control and there's nothing you can do about it, except to watch the dials and say 'My God its gone up to a 120 knots!' And yet at the end it comes back to peace and quietness again, and this is, I suppose, it's the cycle of life isn't it? It's man battling in all kinds of situations, man with man, man with experiment, man with all kinds of relationships rises in anger and it comes down to peace. It's another one of the cycles of living, about to be experienced of living in a different than we are in the northern hemisphere and in the everyday world here.

[0:39:28] Verdenius: And you find all this reflected in 120 knots?

Martin: Well, that's certainly not tranquillity there. There is fear and danger, in some aspects there is a fear and danger, one is conscious of the force and yet I suppose the peace is inside the hut whilst this is raging outside! And you have to say is it 6 o'clock, 12 o'clock, 1800 normally at night and I've got to go out, and I did have to go out on one occasion and I must admit I was nearly swept off my feet and had I not had an ice axe with me and I would have been swept, and I was able to dig that ice axe in when it swept me off my feet, and haul myself to a stop! But that, yes, that was just another one of the cycle of peace and turmoil and going back to this peace, which is I think all relevant to life! You were asking me was there anything else that perhaps I had learnt from that experience, and I believe one of the most valuable things perhaps that I learnt was tolerance, to be able to tolerate people who did things that were perhaps not the way I would do them, the way that people acted and in the way I wouldn't act and yet...I learnt to live with it to accept! This was them and I was me and they right to their own way of doing things, as I was right with mine and yet we could actually get along quite well together accepting that we were different! That we did and approached and did things differently and yet we actually work and live together, and it's a pity that world can't do that as well. There would be a lot more peace in the world [laughter] if they could do that!

[0:42:31] Verdenius: Would you consider going back if you could?

Martin: Oh well yes, I would I suppose, one would always like to go back...yes I would love to go back but I have other responsibilities now, where I didn't have them when I was single man, but yeah I could enjoy it for another year! [Laughter] Yes I could enjoy it yes, but things have changed, things have changed from my day it would be a different ball game I think.

[0:43:16] Verdenius: You said you experienced peace out there and did you ever consider at the time that you were there like maybe I should prefer this place where I can find peace, maybe I could prefer it to Britain?

Martin: Yeah, yes I mean I would say that. I enjoyed it there but I think it's the reflection having come out of it, one looks back and says 'My goodness gracious what a wonderful experience that was'! How, you'd say how simple life was in a way to life back in the UK, but in those days I thought I was coming back to a job on the Royal Research Ship *Discovery*, and perhaps that was a call for me to come back to use then the experience I had in that job. But unfortunately the Association, in my absence, had decided they weren't going to keep the ship and they decided they would give it to the navy, so I came back to no job! [Laughter] Pity! So I went back to the Falklands [laughter], and my good lady came out after me, some months after me, and we were married there and I spent three and a half years in the Falklands! But again it was one of those 50/50 chances because I said to the Crown Agents...the Chief Met officer said when I left if wanted a job in Stanley he could probably use me! 'Ah!' said the Crown Agents, 'That maybe so', he said, 'But we can't fix it, that you'll have to arrange that when you get back'! So it was a case of either I got a job in Stanley or whether I went back in the ice for a year or two years. I needed some money to get married [laughter] and you can't spend money down there so it was a good way of spending [saving] money and doing something you enjoyed doing, so that's how I went back to the Falklands. And I did about six months' met and then I set up the Dependence Treasury away from the Colonial Treasury, because they couldn't get the figures when they wanted them, so I went back into one of my other loves, of accountancy, and set that up until they set someone out from the Colonial Office to head it up, as an official civil servant, and I played second fiddle to him [laughter], but I had three and half years which was most enjoyable in the islands! And I came home with a daughter so that was enjoyable too!

[0:46:30] Verdenius: OK, thank you very much.

Some interesting clips:

- Working for the Boy Scout Association as purser on the *RRS Discovery* on the Thames in London and taking school parties round the ship in the 1950's. The given the chance to join FIDS for a year south. [0:00:00]
- It, seems Captain Scott's granddaughter was christened on the *Discovery* using the ships bell as a font! [0:03:09]
- Offloading cargo at the bases travelling south and being fascinated with Deception Island. [0:05:17]
- Unloading at Hope Bay and using dogs to get items up the slope to the base hut, finding large boxes are often the lightest! [0:08:16]
- Arriving Port Lockroy to see a rock marked with the name of *RRS Discovery* which had visited in 1920. And finally seeing the view of the *Discovery* which featured on a postcard he had been selling in London, which before nobody had been able to tell him where it had been taken! A rare trip off base for 3 of them and trying to build an igloo on the glacier on Wiencke Island! [0:10:27]
- Describing his daily work routine of a very long day! [0:14:35]
- Talks about rare spare time and the impact of Mozart's clarinet concerto on the base! [0:22:12]

- Becoming the base first aider and his very large medical chest and some of its contents? And, then having to treat a case of piles! [0:25:41]
- Using a blow lamp as somebody to free somebody that had got to close to the pee bucket in very cold weather! [0:27:05]
- Describing an optical phenomenon he saw one night on his Met ob? [0:30:20]
- The dangers of rapid weather changes and what could happen! [0:34:20]
- Doing his Met ob in gale force winds! [0:39:28]
- Then returning to work in the Falklands and his getting married there. [0:43:16]