

THOMAS MILLER

Edited transcript of interview with Thomas Miller, Navigating Officer on old *John Biscoe*, interviewed by Japp Verdenius. BAS archives AD6/24/3/30. Transcribed by Allan Wearden, January 2020.

Miller: I'll tell you about two rather different experiences, I mean different from one another. One them was after we had relieved all the Antarctic bases and we were travelling north in open water - well only a marine navigator can convey to you the exhilaration, sense of freedom, that comes to you when you break free of the ice pack, and you're once again in open water! - and we were heading north towards the Falklands after a particular arduous tour of duty. And I went into the chartroom to look at the Falkland Island chart to asses all the factors concerning the landfall, when you were likely to reach soundings as it's called, and I was studying the chart when suddenly - it was quite an amazing experience - it was though something had got me by the shoulders and propelled me out of the chartroom on to the wing of the bridge! And when I got there I didn't know whether I was looking at a reflection of the chart projected in front of you, (which you get from studying a white chart out into the night) or whether it was an ice berg, but I acted automatically and gave the order hard to starboard and pulled the telegraph to full astern, because on a right-handed screw if you put the wheel hard over and go full astern the ship turns very violently but very quickly, heels right over, and it was a mercy that I did because there was an isolated berg and the lookout had nodded off to sleep, he hadn't seen it, and with us going full speed if I hadn't been there and done that we would have undoubtedly have hit it and become an unknown marine casualty! And...I can't explain it I only know that I experienced it and the particular circumstances of it to me cannot be explained by saying that it was a hallucination of any kind.

[0:03:44] Miller: The other experience that I want to tell you about is - far more material in content but quite funny really - we were travelling in open water, I believe between Coronation Island and Signy, and my watch was the 12 to 4, and the depth recorder was working. Now the instruction book said it was one of these, it was American machine, and it had a circular dial with a red blip on it, and according to the instruction manual this device by the way measured up to 200 fathoms and it could not over record, meaning that if it went round to 200 fathoms it would then cut out, that it would, if it showed 5 fathoms that was 5 fathoms not 205. Well we were supposedly in deep water and I switched on this machine I expect it have been about 2am in the morning, about the middle of the watch, (I'm not too sure about that but it doesn't really matter that), and to my astonishment I got a reading of 5 fathoms! So I immediately slowed down because if we were running into shoal water you know full speed was not the way to proceed [laughter] so we got down to slow ahead and this stayed at 5 fathoms, and then it went to 3 fathoms so I stopped! There was the telegraph at stop and I thought, well, it was fortunately very calm weather, and I thought 'What do we do now?', because the ship was coasting along and then it stopped and the reading was somewhere round about between 2 and 3 fathoms, and I thought 'Well we can't be really on a shoal', and so the responsibility was mine, so I had the watch use a sounding lead and they couldn't find bottom. So I thought 'Well this is ridiculous(!), are we perched on a pinnacle of rock?' ...So I wondered what to do, and the men were highly amused about this, particularly

the bo'sun who obviously knew more than the others on what was going on, and so very gently I eased the telegraph to slow ahead hoping there was going to be no rendering of timbers, nothing happened! Shortly afterwards the reading was a 180 fathoms, it just went back and I had an immense sigh of relief because I realised that the thing had over recorded. But to a navigating officer it wasn't a very comfortable experience and although you pass on the information that this thing can over record you don't put things like that down in the log book because it would make you look too silly! [Laughter]

[0:09:08] Verdenius: Is that true?

Miller: Pardon?

[0:09:11] Verdenius: That recording device it's...?

Miller: Yes it's echo sounder.

[0:09:15] Verdenius: Yes.

Miller: An echo sounder yes, and it had a circular dial and the manual said that it couldn't over record, meaning that as I say that if it was 5 fathoms that meant that it was 5 fathoms and not 205, but on this for whatever reason it must have been recording round because there's no other explanation, but I found it a very uncomfortable experience! [Laughter] Much easier to talk about afterwards than experience at the time!

[0:10:13] Verdenius: You just said that the....men you brought to the Antarctic on your boat had also been at the same frontier that Shackleton had been?

Miller: [Big sigh] Yes but not to anything like, what shall I say, we didn't suffer anything like the privations that he did. I suppose this experience that I've just told you about me being propelled out on to the wing of the bridge, it doesn't really compare with Shackleton's experiences but to me it is an example of, what shall I say, an interaction of two planes of activity, the human and something more, this side of the horizon that we call death. I don't think we shall know or understand anymore about it, but to me the experience was real and just as the...the experience of Shackleton and his party, when they had the impression there was a fourth member there when they knew they were only three of them, that experience was real to them, do you get my meaning? But I wouldn't like in any way to suggest that the privations we suffered were anything like those that of Shackleton and his men experienced!

[0:13:30] Verdenius: Had something changed during this ten years?

Miller: How do you mean?

[0:13:39] Verdenius: Something must have changed, because you went to about the same circumstances as Shackleton went?

Miller: Yes, but their hardships were infinitely more arduous than ours, just the same as our experiences were in some ways harder than those what people would experience today.

[0:14:35] Verdenius: How would you describe Shackleton?

Miller: As a great leader of men! A very competent seaman and a man with a well founded belief in providence, or the love of God, whichever way you like to put it, and a man of great vision and determination. This to me is proved by his amazing ability to bring what you might call a victory out of disaster, and his capacity to do that was really quite amazing! And I've only got the records to go on, but having seen those areas and experienced the type of seas that he sailed that open boat through 800 miles of I find it quite amazing that he achieved what he did, quite incredible!

[0:16:28] Verdenius: Just a minute.

Miller: Where he says the rope could not be recovered '*We flung down the adze from the top of the fall and also the log box wrapped in one of our blouses. That was all we brought except our wet clothes from the Antarctic, which a year-and-a-half before we had entered with a well found ship full equipment and high hopes! That was all of tangible things, but in memories we were rich, we had pierced the veneer of outside things, we had seen God in his splendour, we had heard the text that nature renders, we had reached the naked soul of man!*' Mind you Shackleton could write good descriptive English, but I felt that his heart was in that!

[0:17:54] Verdenius: Now you said that this frontier which you spoke of earlier was sometimes reached during the '40s and the times you were there?

Miller: Yes I did, I did say that. I'm wondering if that was a true analogy because there were times particularly when we were going into, when I say the Argentine Islands that is just the Argentine archipelago the group of islands, and there were just a set of dots on the Antarctic chart and there were not on the sketch maps that I had, and it was a very hazardous thing to take a ship in there. We had to ask the base to light a fire so that we could see the smoke coming up, and also when we went in there we had to lower a boat with some men and one of whom had a lead line, and we had to follow the boat in. Well, this was a similar procedure to what the seamen had followed for many, many years, centuries in fact, when they were going into uncharted waters! And making a landfall this is how they entered harbours; they had to there's no other way to do it, because you don't know what's there. Well the responsibility on you when you have to do this is rather great and you really have to trust in your guardian angel, if you like, because you have to make decisions, and you just hope they are the right ones. In my case they were, and to that extent I reached my own frontier, because these frontiers are to some extent personal things and you are tested to the limit of your own abilities and your own...faith at that particular time! The fact that in a different age and at a different time...that frontier is at a different place for a different man is to a certain extent beside the point, you have to cope with it when it's in front of you and you are conscious of the lives that are dependent of you making the right decision. [Gap] Yes 1st of March, 2nd of March that's 1948.

[0:22:55] Miller: [Sounds of looking through notes and gap]. So we would have been working through pack ice late in February and in early March which was late in the season.

[0:23:51] Verdenius: Do you know why you were so late?

Miller: Well for one thing we were late starting anyway and another thing was the difficulties that we had while down there, trying to push south in very difficult conditions, and it was only that we were able to follow that American ice breaker into Marguerite Bay that we were able to get near enough to Stonington Island at all. And the extra time that was spent and of course the ice conditions held us up, so that the sea was already beginning to freeze before we were clear of pack ice, which is a very hazardous position for a wooden ship, fortunately we made it!

[0:25:29] Verdenius: For a steel ship?

Miller: Well then it depends it depends on the construction of the ship and as to whether it has reinforced bows that enable it to work through pack. An ordinary steam ship like the - at one time because of the non availability of other ships I believe that the Falkland Island, one of the Falkland Islands Company steamers, the mail steamer that goes between Stanley and Montevideo - I believe that went south to some of the more northern Antarctic bases. Well a ship like that, although it was a steel ship would have had to be extremely careful about ice navigation because the bows were not sufficiently strengthened to withstand the pressures that would be encountered, but the modern Antarctic research ships have specially reinforced bows that their design is such that they are able to work through pack quite safely in normal conditions. But apart from the very large ice breakers no ship is able to withstand the worse pressures than an ice pack, the pack ice can exert, particularly if it is caught near a lee shore where the ice starts rafting then a ship can come under, any ship can come under intolerable pressures there and that is a thing to avoid. But this why a ship can only winter in the Antarctic in a very sheltered position; you operate down there in the Antarctic summer and you come away for that reason, because you can't operate there in the Antarctic winter, there would be no research programme possible it just wouldn't be feasible to do it, there'd be no point in doing it.

[0:29:29] Verdenius: But this time, your presence in Antarctica is purely scientific?

Miller: At the present time?

[0:29:45] Verdenius: At the present time?

Miller: Yes.

[0:29:52] Verdenius: But at this time after the war was it was quite scientific?

Miller: Oh yes, yes. I think the, one of the driving influences was the interest of the Argentine in our Antarctic territories, I think this is what prompted this expedition, that's interesting because I didn't have colour film then. [Note: Must be looking at a photo.]

[0:30:34] Verdenius: Stormy night sky, reds and green and it's purple, generally lots of colours?

Miller: We were swept out to sea with both anchors down that night, yes, because that's a hut that's been completely covered. But there was something here - ah yes! That was when, this is an example you see a heavy load and you can see how that boat was loaded because there's an oar going right across the heads of the men that are rowing! That just to give the idea of how much those boats were loaded, the freeboard sometimes was only about three inches! We ran very great risks and when you beached at the other end it was not a jetty, and so the heavier the load the lower the boat was in the water and so the further out you had to jump in! And then all this stuff had to be manhandled up the beach...it was hard work! You see that.

[0:32:11] Verdenius: The possibilities for big bergs, there's a big role in the....you are you say experiences like meeting the Filchner, at being at Filchner and earlier you tell me the story about a depth meter?

Miller: Yes, yes.

[0:32:46] Verdenius: This depth reading, and by Shackleton?

Miller: Yes.

[0:32:52] Verdenius: It seems to be me about taking responsibility for yourself and for others?

Miller: Yes it does.

[0:33:01] Verdenius: And not so much about providence?

Miller: Well you see unless you trusted in a providence....not that you were conscious of it except in a fleeting sense sometimes, I would sometimes think 'Oh God! I hope I'm doing the right thing'! But then you've got to do it because you can't say anything like that to people around you are expecting you to give orders and to know what to do, and sometimes the only way that you can do it is admitted you've got to have some professional knowledge and experience, but to a certain extent, in my view you trust in providence as well as your own ability. But there are plenty of people that would say that they trust in their own ability because they're quite oblivious of any providential assistance ever being there, so they can't call on something that they don't believe is there, and that's a valid view point! On those...on those salvage tugs I met men who would only use the name of Christ to swear by, and they would be regarded as very rough and uncouth sort of men and they were by certain standards! But I have also known them quite willingly put their life on the line in an attempt to save other people, and so that some people would argue therefore that providence has, got nothing to do with it. But I would say providence sometimes uses the most unlikely servants, it's just a way of looking at it, do you get what I mean? [Gap] You see in all these things it is to some extent the stand point from which you view it; you can get quite different accounts of the same happening but it's seen from different standpoints by different people, but this is always the case from the standpoint from which they speak...each standpoint can be correct for the person that's making it, it's just the assessment and the interpretation is different.

[0:37:34] Verdenius: About the people on the boat, Fuchs on the boat, Adie, Dalglish?

Miller: Yes and various sorts of seamen. Well the scientific staff are, they took part in shipboard life but most of them were interested in, naturally, mainly in their own particular discipline, like the glaciologist is interested in ice and glaciers and so on, and the geologist he can't wait to get a look at the rocks! And the naturalist is very keen to observe seals, penguins and all sorts of other natural life, and this to some extent colours their, or yes, colours their attitude to the voyage and their attitude to the expedition as a whole. And the seamen have quite a different approach to it and it's quite interesting to see how even amongst the seamen different personalities reacted differently to what happened, and to many of them it was, it was just a another sailing job with a difference, whereas the scientific staff saw and noticed all sorts of things that most of the sailors didn't notice at all, but this is bound to be. And they react quite differently to stressful and difficult situations...in many ways you could say that what you meet in the Antarctic causes you to...to search for and use in your deepest resources the situations that you meet and call the forth! And it tends to tell you and others what you've got and others, what you haven't.

[0:41:33] Verdenius: You've seen these men before they actually were there I think?

Miller: Sorry?

[0:41:48] Verdenius: You saw them on the way to Antarctica?

Miller: Yeah, yes.

[0:41:55] Verdenius: When you saw them back later, could you recognise that they'd been there?

Miller: I would say definitely yes, yes...it broadens your experience for life in all sorts of ways and generally speaking it shows yes. Mind you I found the same thing at sea during the war that I grew up at sea. When I say grew up as I said earlier the years between 18 and 21 or more so between 18 and 25 are very important developing years and depending on what you experience and what you have to do, and how you cope with it between those times well it has a lasting effect on you I'm sure!

[0:43:38] Verdenius: How old were these men?

Miller: Well I suppose Fuchs was older, but most of them were ranging from very early 20s to early 30s round about that time, and the chief officer of the ship, Lord Headley I think he was, he was in his middle 50s but he was regarded as quite an old hand to be down there, but he was a very unorthodox character. But I was very glad he was there, I had a very good relationship with him and was greatly indebted to him, because he had a Master Mariner's certificate in steam and sail! Well that is very unusual - well when I say unusual it wasn't unusual at the beginning of the century, but it was unusual in the 1940s to find somebody that was a sailing ship man or had been! He'd run away to sea, and served his time on Cape Horner's and he got his Master Mariner's certificate the year I was born! And I used to pull his leg and tell him he was my sea daddy you see and, but he was a... he was a big help but certainly I would also say that once you have lived with three years on the deck of Dutch ocean going tugs...there is not much in the seafaring world that you shrink from! [Laughter]

In other words is what I'm really saying to you is that I served in a good training school, the school of life in a fo'c'sle on Dutch tugs!

[0:46:49] Verdenius: Can I have a look on the map?

Miller: Oh yes, and I also had immense respect for and great interest in his work was Nansen, the Norwegian.

[0:47:00] Verdenius: Yeah.

Miller: He also was a very great man, a fascinating character, but he wasn't concerned with the Antarctic he was concerned with the Arctic, but he did a tremendous amount of pioneering work and his humanitarian work after his Arctic work was finished was sufficient to earn him a place in history anyway! But he was a fascinating character...but he was a man, you see, that I don't know if he would have described himself as atheist but he was certainly a free thinker. And he had, he certainly had no professed religious faith, well I don't think Shackleton had from the point of view of supporting any given denomination, but he just had a...what shall I say...a belief and a trust in the workings of providence. But this was in part due to how he felt providence had treated him ...but I find all these things very interesting, in fact fascinating!

[0:48:50] Verdenius: Is it just as easy for you to... to get to know or defines what makes people tick whom you brought from Antarctica?

Miller: Sorry, do I?

[0:49:14] Verdenius: Is it just easier for you to find out what made Shackleton tick as what made people tick whom you brought to Antarctica?

Miller: No I, no I don't find it easy to find that people who I went to Antarctica with, what made them tick but there are various reasons for that. But one of them is I was so thundering busy that we couldn't talk about this like that so that we never discussed it. The other thing is...that I don't know - and this is not unusual - I don't know any of them well enough because to come to an understanding of these things you need to have a long and trustworthy relationship with them, otherwise these subjects don't arise.

[0:50:40] Verdenius: When you talk about Shackleton?

Miller: Pardon, but you see Shackleton is back in history and there are various accounts of his life and people have made a study of it, and you can see all sorts of things laid out and you can consider them. Well on that basis you can let, because how many times do you feel that you, for example that you read an obituary of somebody you know that's just died and it's somebody you thought you knew well, but you read things in his obituary and you think 'My God, did he do that and did he think that?' I never knew anything about it! Well it's the same with people that you go to the Antarctic with; they won't know much about me and I shan't know much about them until, well partly they might read it from obituary notices and partly if somebody thinks it's important enough to analyse me and put it on paper, well then they'll

understand something about me. And it's the same for the people that we took and I don't think that you ever do know them well enough to be able to say, unless you have years of association with them. And you're too close to the situation to see it in perspective and as I repeat at the time that you're that thundering busy with what you've got to do with you that you haven't got time to talk about things like this!

Some interesting clips:

- Stopping the ship with a warning from providence! [0:00:00]
- Finding a fault with the American echo sounder when over 200 fathoms and still recording! [0:03:44]
- A quote from Ernest Shackleton about his experience at South Georgia! [0:16:28]
- Having to follow an American ice breaker into Marguerite Bay in order to reach Stonington! [0:23:51]
- The dangers of unloading cargo at the bases from small boats. [0:30:34]
- The Chief Officer of the wooden John Biscoe 'Lord Headley', and of working on Dutch salvage tugs when first at sea. [0:43:38]