

DAVID FRANK

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Interviewer (Q1): Lize-Marie van der Watt | History Department | Stellenbosch University
Interviewer (Q2): Dora Scott | C-I-B Antarctic Legacy Project | Stellenbosch University
Respondent(A): David Frank | Team leader | SANAE 36 | 1997

A: I'll tell you why I love this photo: because you've got my sister- and brother-in-law, over here, who are absolutely beaming with excitement. And then my poor parents ... Look at their faces! They're going, "Oh, I don't want you to go! What are you doing?!" This was taken on deck of the ship as we were about to go. I was at law school at the time. I was a few months away; I had articles at a great firm; my parents thought I was finally going to give up all my craziness – because I'd done some silly things before – and then I went and said, "Oh, by the way, I'm not going to be a lawyer next year; I'm going to Antarctica!" But they were wonderful. They grew to embrace it. So we ... It was the first team in the new base. There'd been a hiatus of a few years, as you well know. So there was this big discontinuity in the programme – we didn't have the benefit of getting a handover from another team. We went into a base that was untested and untried, and the change-over, our first summer, was incredibly stressful.

Q1: Why?

A: We worked 16 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Q1: Just to move in?

A: To move the base. We were working with the Public Works Department to build that base. And it was incredibly stressful. The whole team hadn't ... We hadn't actually even met each other properly...

Q1: So you didn't have any proper team training?

A: We had some; we did have some of the training. But the first time that everyone met everyone was about a week before we were left alone; because we had some ... Our doctor came late – she hadn't even met us.

Q1: Who was the doctor?

A: Aithne Rowse – the first woman to over-winter at SANAE. Incredibly brave woman to have done that – she hadn't met anyone; she just arrived ... already we were all on the ice ...

Q1: By plane or by the Agulhas?

A: No, all by ship the Agulhas, that season, did three trips, because of the construction.

Q1: And you also had to deal probably with the construction crews themselves as well?

- A:** Yes. So you know, it was very heavy on Public Works ...
- Q1:** Is that your Polar Circle event?
- A:** No, this wasn't the crossing of the Circle; this was just entertainment aboard ship. We went down very early that year. We left the 1st of November, with the intention of trying to get a head start on the construction. It took us about a month to get down, because we took a gamble and it just didn't pay off – the ice was very thick. So, to entertain ourselves, we were ... you know, we'd play games on board. This was a tug of war on the helicopter deck, strung through some pulleys.
- Q1:** So you ... When you went down, was there a shell already?
- A:** Yes. So there'd been work for ... I forget ... two or three seasons before. What was in place was the shell of Blocks A and B and the skeleton of Block C. And so all the interior of Blocks A and B had to be done and the exterior and the interior of Block C. It was a huge task, and the ... like I say, it was working 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. The physical effort, the strain on everyone there, was immense.
- Q1:** So the team members actually had to help physically with the construction?
- A:** Yes, we did. And we were all doing different things. So there was no cohesion as a team, because we were all working off in different areas and ... And it was kind of hard to form a team in that environment, just because, even existing teams – Public Works teams – were just under so much strain and so much pressure. The best thing was when you would wake up in the morning and you'd feel a storm. We lived in this construction base, which was just converted cargo containers a few hundred meters downhill from the base, and you'd feel it vibrating, and you'd think, "Ah, thank heavens!" and you could sleep and ... you know. And so the storms would last a few days after the first day; maybe well into the second day, people would start emerging and start getting bored and listless, and eventually people would want the storm to finish.
- Q1:** So even in winter there were construction people?
- A:** No. Construction happens in the summers, in the preceding summers. The first summer, they just went and they drilled the piles – the support. The second summer they went and they put up the skeleton, the steel skeleton work. I think it was over three summers. The third, they'd started putting the base together. ... I parked that one.
- Q1:** Can you remember the name of the vehicle?
- A:** Number 2.
- Q1:** Oh. Just Number 2? Didn't you give them names?
- A:** No, there wasn't that same kind of romance. I think in the early teams, they had fewer vehicles and they were much more attached to them. You know, we had a large fleet; there

really wasn't that kind of sentimentality about the vehicles. ... So, I guess what I want to try and do, is pull out what would have been unique about our experience. It was tough; it was stressful; it was great. It was absolutely marvellous, and I'm very happy with it, but when ... Before I went, I made a point of speaking to some previous leaders, and I remember one of them said to me ... We were sitting in my office in Pretoria, and he said to me, "It was the most stressful experience I ever had." And I was sitting there, going, '*ja, ja, whatever*'; I didn't understand it until I was down there.

Q1: What made it stressful, apart from the long work hours?

A: Well, the whole experience. We were down there 16 months. It started off with an environment ... Oh that was interesting – in our second summer, the Air Force changed over the helicopters from the Super Pumas to the Oryxes and they were operating four helicopters down there that season, which I think is the only season ...

Q1: Yes, that's a pretty picture, with the four of them flying in tandem ...

A: Yes, they did a little air show for us.

A: So the stress ... It's a naturally stressful environment: you've got a very heterogeneous group of people, who are thrust together in a strange environment; you've got to be completely self-sufficient – it takes a strange mix of gregarious and also a bit of a loner. You know, you've got to be able to just leave behind your family and friends, but then you have to be able to bond completely with a bunch of strangers.

Q1: Who you wouldn't necessarily bond with in South Africa?

A: Exactly, you wouldn't necessarily choose as your friends. And these people are your colleagues, your family, your friends – everything. And that in a very alien environment ... You'll recognise that – that's what's left of SANAE 3. ... It's a very alien environment; you have to survive. You have different decisions to make compared to 'normal', you know. When you're living here in Jo'burg, very few of your decisions are 'if I do this, I live; if I don't do it, I die'. Suddenly you're there; you're faced with these life and death decisions all the time.

Q2: In the older photographs we saw, they also had these ones, but they only had 'Main Road' and stuff like 'Bouvet' and 'Oslo' ...

Q1: And 'Springs'!

A: Well, this was the sign that we dug up; this was left from SANAE 3.

Q1: Where is it now?

A: Hopefully somewhere down there. I'm not sure exactly where. There are two reasons why the signs all point in the same direction: one is you're so far south that most things are pretty much north; secondly anything that pointed off in other directions just got blown off.

Q1: So what direction did those point then?

A: That's mainly north-ish. But, you know, for instance, any signs that would've pointed off to North America, or South America – which would've been perpendicular to that – would've blown off. ... So the reasons for the stress – and particularly in our year ... The base was new it was untested. We had occasions where the base came very close to failure ...

Q1: What would happen?

A: The heating ... the power generation systems, the cooling and the heating of the base, was all linked ... And that was the state of the base when we arrived ... So if the base cools down too much, then you get freezing of the cooling coils that are supposed to cool the engines, and what happens is, you suddenly lose your ability to power the base. So we were, on a few occasions in bad storms, confronted with the possibility, just a few seconds away, of losing all our power generation ability, and we would have had to move down to the construction base for the rest of the period and live very primitive and nasty lives.

Q1: How long did you stay in the construction base? Did you ever stay in the construction base?

A: Yes, when we suddenly moved in, for the first ... maybe for the first two months, everybody was living in the construction base, because the main base just wasn't ready; it was just impossible for us to stay in it. And then it was quite a momentous occasion when the team, the over-wintering team, was able to move out and move up into the base, incomplete as it then was – I mean, the toilets weren't working. You've heard about the *swart sakkie-sisteem*?

Q1: Yes.

A: You've heard about all the jokes around it?

Q1: No. Well, I don't actually know about the *swart sakkie-sisteem*. I just know they want the new system on Marion bases on that.

A: Oh, okay. So the *swart sakkie-sisteem* ... when ... Away from the base, where we had a rather ineffective water treatment system, when you go to the toilet – there's no delicate way of describing this – when you want to pee, there's a two-hundred litre oil drum that the men would pee into, with a little funnel; when you have to go do something else, there's this wooden construction toilet – you lift up the toilet seat and there's a hole with nails, and you take your *swart sakkie* and you put the *sakkie* around on the holes, put the toilet seat back down ... and when you're finished, you take your *swart sakkie* and you tie a knot in it and then you go and dump it in a drum, and that's all returned back to South Africa. That system's still used now – when you're away from the base on a field trip or something, that's exactly how you go to the toilet and all the human waste gets removed and taken home. It's a very strange situation: you walk out of the toilet and you've got your *swart sakkie*, then you see your friend – 'hey, how's it going?!' and you're carrying your *swart*

sakkie ... ! It's also an interesting feedback mechanism; you'd go 'okay, how much did I eat yesterday?' And then when new people come to the base, and they're explained the *swart sakkie-sisteem*, there was a standing joke where'd you'd say "And in order to preserve space in the drums where we throw the *swart sakkies*, you have to remove all the air from the *swart sakkies*, so you have to suck the air out ... !" And you should see the people's faces looking shocked and horrid at the possibility of removing the air.

Q1: What did the female doctor do? Was she the only female present at this time?

A: No, we also had ... I don't know ... That first summer, was she the only female? I'm trying to recall ... I can look in my diary. There was another ... an environmental officer ... First summer, yes. We had Joanne Daneel, who was one of the environmental officers; second summer there was someone from *Omgewingsake* who came down to do inventory, and also of course there was Nel ... What was her first name? There were two women – Nel and ... there was a physicist from Natal (L. Dawes) – who were in the SANAE 37 team. But for a while, I think Amy may have been the only woman, or one of only two women, on the base.

Q1: But it wasn't noticeable that there's only one woman there?

A: No, I think for her it was noticeable. It certainly had a strong moderating effect on the crowd. If you have a lot of men, all alone, then they behave very differently to if there's only one woman. And Amy was quite a conservative influence and certainly just moderated all of our behaviour.

Q1: I was just thinking about the description of the toilet and what would she do? Obviously, the *swart sakkie* she can also use?

A: Yes, she just wouldn't use the drums. She managed quite well. But, for instance, in the construction base, there was just one set of showers, so there was a special time designated for her, because there was no women's shower, so she would have her own shower time, when the men obviously couldn't go into the communal showers.

Q1: You also stayed in tents?

A: No, this was going out and provisioning the geologists' field team. They arrive, they head out on their Ski-Doo's, spend a couple of months in the field, come back, have a shower and then get on the ship. And during their time out in the field, the helicopters go out and provision them with supplies.

Q2: Was that still the Sarie Marais Base?

A: No, this was a completely mobile base.

Q1: Where the geologists stayed?

A: Yes, so they'll go ...

Q1: ... All in tents?

A: ... anywhere. They'll just go find a place where there are interesting rocks and put up their tents and walk around and chip off rocks. So it didn't have any particular ... no. ... This was going down one of the buttresses ... I'm assuming that you've got a lot of knowledge and that you understand the layout of the base and how it all fits in ... So this in going down one of those buttresses to sample the water quality, because the water treatment plant wasn't working well, and so we had rather smelly brown water ... Going down the side of the rock face, which was in contravention of our Treaty obligations. I'm not sure exactly what the status is now, but we're going to fix that. ...

Q1: I think that they have now a sort of a bacteria-based plant now ...

A: Yes, well that's what it was supposed to be then, but just the bacteria weren't happy and weren't eating all the waste like they should have. You saw us there, climbing down ... There was that death last year, when they were going down the crevasse. I know it was published as a training exercise. You know, I smiled sadly to myself ... Because you do it for entertainment – people go out and they play; you know, climbing on cliffs and climbing in the crevasses – it's really not a training exercise, but it would have to have been framed like that ...

Q1: Yes, obviously. I got the idea that people climbed down crevasses for exercise, but also just because it's nice and there's something you can't do here.

Q1: Oh, about the construction ... Were you there when – I think the guy's called Eric Minnie – when he was lost in the blizzard? One of the construction guys and they found him after 14 hours or something.

A: No, and it wasn't Eric Minnie. His name, I think, was ... Why do I think Pierre Venter? ... There, that's where he was found ... It was in the season prior ... We got there at the end of '96, so it was the '95-'96 change-over; it was one of the Air Force support guys. He went out from the construction base during a storm. The construction base's layout was very different then; it was just a bunch of separate cabins, and moving from one to another, he lost his way and was found the next morning when the storm cleared, and that was the point where he was found.

Q1: No, I talking about a different incident, where one of the construction guys, he went out. I can't remember ... They searched ... Why he went out ... He was lost for about 8 hours and they found him alive.

A: Eric Minnie. That rings a bell, it could have been him. So that was in the '97-'98 change-over. It was the first year that South Africa flew ...

Q1: That's a funny photo ... Are you having a braai there?

A: Yes, it was my -20.

Q2: Yes, that's why I'm laughing. What's up with the t-shirt and the snow?

A: It was the first time we could go outside. So that was me – I don't know if you recognise me. That was me on the far right; I'm braaing.

Q2: With the t-shirt?

A: Yes. You know, you just want to go outside and enjoy it ... So I guess there's a bit of bravado as well, and you know, when my knees started going purple, I went inside and changed. ... That's when I was trying to braai indoors during a storm. There's the ...

Q1: The Black Label ...

A: The Black Label and the oxygen masks, because of all the smoke indoors.

A: Eric Minnie, yes. So it was the first year that South Africa flew people down; it was the '97-'98 change-over. They flew an advance crew of Public Works guys down to an ice base called Blue One; it was a few hundred miles away from SANAE. They arrived and the weather closed in and they weren't able to fly on the smaller Twin Otters from Blue One to SANAE – they'd fly a Hercules from Cape Town to Blue One, then twin Otters from Blue One to SANAE. So the guys had to stay in tents during the storm and ... It's coming back to me now – I'm pretty sure it was Eric Minnie, who, during that storm, left the tent and got lost. They found him; he had ... he wasn't badly frost-bitten, but he was in the early stages of it, and they managed to save him and he was fine and came and was able to work the rest of the season. It was a near miss, because you saw that cross of the guy who, two years before that ... I could be wrong, but the name Pierre Venter comes to mind ...

Q1: It comes to my mind as well, yes.

A: ... Who in very similar circumstances, in a storm, left the cabin ... That's midnight, New Year's Eve '96-'97 – you can see that it's from the construction base, looking up from the right, behind the flag is the base, to give you some perspective of where the construction base was.

Q1: I'm just noticing again the colours in the distance. Did you realise there was going to be some controversy about the colours?

A: Oh, that we were building the biggest old South African flag ever constructed? Yes ... No, we were very aware of it. Remember, 1996 ... That's Senator Stefan Grové, who came down during the middle of the summer season for the official opening of the base. It was ...

Q1: In a wheelchair?

A: Yes.

Q1: Wow!

A: I don't know what's happened to him now. He was an ANC Senator – I'm not sure why he particularly he had the honour of unveiling the base. So we had a whole bunch of dignitaries and journalists, etcetera, who came down. There was a big party. The base was absolutely

not completed. They then got back on the Agulhas and sailed home and we continued with the construction of the base. So the base ... So when it was left ... I'll get back to the question of the flags – there's something interesting politics. When the base was left and we had to move into it, it was, there was such a rush. Literally, the last of the PWD department guys they dropped their tools where they'd been working and ran for the last helicopter that took them off to the bukta to the ship.

Q1: So they literally worked to the last minute?

A: To the last minute. Things were incomplete. We had a lot of work to do. We felt a little bit resentful even, because there was still so much for us to do. Winter was coming; we knew that we had to get the base in shape for the winter, and it wasn't ready yet.

Q1: And I suppose there were also scientists on the team, so they couldn't actually do their work?

A: Yes. So they had to start with their research – I mean that's exactly why we were there. But everyone had to just get stuck in and get involved and just do stuff, which wasn't the sole cause of our stress. It was certainly something that added to it. ... The flags ... Ja, it was quite ironic ... There the base was poorly sealed; you can see Antarctica coming into the base during a storm ... So this was in 1996, so just two years after the new Constitution, democracy, whatever and the Civil Service was still in a state of change, and you know, there were many people who were very proud to have the old South African flag there. ... Are you learning to recognise me yet in these photos? I'm the one there on the left. That's cleaning the heat exchangers.

Q1: I must say, you look quite the cave man.

Q2: You look like a miner.

A: Well, there's all this soot, this carbon from the heat exchangers. ... So there were ...

Q1: What's that about??

A: It's Spring Day.

Q1: Oh, Spring Day.

A: It was way too cold still to go outside, but we just thought that we'd celebrate it anyway.

Q1: Why are you dressed like an arrow?

A: You know, you bring down stuff that you can dress up in and you take whatever you can find.

Q1: Okay, back to the flags.

A: I'll tell you interesting commentary here. This was our team photo, at the end of the year. There were 10 of us on the team; if you count, there's only 9 there. One of the guys, at this

stage, he decided he didn't even want to be in the team photo. He had removed himself from the team; he just didn't want to be a part of it.

Q1: Went his own way?

A: Yes. Now, here's the irony of how *Omgewingsake* would think about managing SANAE. We all did questionnaires, where we all assessed everyone else, and the guy who'd removed himself from the team, resoundingly everyone, to the question of "Would you recommend him for future expeditions?", everyone said "No, absolutely not". Two years later, *Omgewingsake* brought him back down to run a takeover, because he had technical skills, but there was just no acknowledgement of social skills. You know, there were certain people who really shouldn't have ever been selected to go down there. I question sometimes whether I would have chosen myself as the expedition leader – just I was so young and inexperienced, but they just didn't look at things like that and would just thrust people in who weren't necessarily ready or prepared, in part because they didn't have a big pool to choose from and would have to take what they could get. So the politics, the flag ... there was still ... Amy Rowse, the doctor – there she was converting a sleeping bag into a kite. We got her to run the sowing machine – not because she was a woman, but because she was a surgeon and we figured that she would know how to do that ...

Q1: She would know about needles!

A: Yes. So there was still even attempts at racial segregation when I was down there.

Q1: Really?

A: I ... They got married; Hein de Beer and Aithne Rowse ...

Q2: Racial segregation?

A: Yes. In the second summer, everyone now was living in the main base, and there were attempts by both *Omgewingsake* and Public Works to segregate, racially, the team. They wanted to ... There were a few black members of the Public Works Department, and they wanted to put them in a separate block from all the white Public Works Department guys, like in a separate room ... All the white Public Works guys were in Block B; there was one room available at the end of Block A – they wanted to put the black workers there.

Q1: And the coloured guys?

A: The coloured guys were accepted with the whites, but the blacks were a completely different class. The roles and responsibilities were a little unclear. You know, there was the Head of the ... the Public Works guy – who's actually still there ... Not Public Works, *Omgewingsake* guy, who was officially in charge during the take-over, and then the Head of the Public Works, he was supposed to be in charge of the Public Works people, but I said, listen, I'm the leader; I'm responsible for the base, and we're not having segregation. And they said, well, we overrule ... we outrank you. And I said, fine, put it in writing. And they

backed down. So as soon as I said I'll accept your authority, but I give me a written instruction, they then changed it and then the Public Works team was racially integrated in their accommodation. But it created a lingering sense of hostility; afterwards the guys weren't very happy with me, because of that. And this was nothing new; this was in my report. Have you got the leaders' reports; do you have access to them?

Q2: We don't. Where are they?

Q1: Probably also at *Omgewingsake*?

A: Yes, they would be. At the end of every season, the leaders were supposed to write a report. They should be there. I'm sure you should have decades' worth of leaders' reports if you go ask them.

Q1: We have contacted Henry Valentine about it, but he's very busy apparently with the Marion change-over.

A: Is Susan Vosloo still doing the HR for ...

Q1: Yes.

A: Ask Susan. She's marvellously efficient, Susan.

Q1: That's really interesting, because I suppose you'd – as far as I can assess from just reading the names, as one does, there weren't any black or coloured team members.

A: No. Ours was the first team with a woman and the last all-white team; actually no – there were ... The team after us, I think they had one black member, but the team after that was all-white again. So there was a couple of years where there was swinging from racially integrated to not. But we were all white.

Q1: But there could be several reasons for that.

A: Yes. In part ... There's the polluted effluent discharge ... In part, just because it's hard to find people anyway; now you have to try and find technically qualified black members for the team, and it's tricky ... That's the Norwegian Inspector Team – you know, under the Antarctic Treaty system, everyone gets to inspect everyone else ...

Q1: How many visits did you have from other teams? Or not teams, from other countries? Because of this new base?

A: The Germans came – at Neumayer, they're the closest base and as you know, now, for off-loading the ship, they actually use Neumayer and then they bring it over land. At that stage, there was no established over-surface route and they only would fly in. So the Germans came in; Swedes and Norwegians from Troll would come in. We also had ... Somewhere there would be a photo in there that I missed along the way ... We had the first tourist circumnavigation come to us at the coast, at E-Base. It was on the ... you can check my diary if you need to ... It was on the Captain Klebnikov, I think, for outrageous sums of money,

many tens of thousands of dollars. The tourists sailed around the whole continent, stopping at different bases. They stopped at us; we gave the whole tour of E-Base, explained the *swart sakkie-sisteem* to them ...

Q1: Did you give them a meal or ... ?

A: Yes, we ... I don't know. It's somewhere there. Did you see the pictures of us ... There were some guys with some platters of food and ...

Q2: No, but there was a picture of you sitting around a table with flags in the background.

A: No, that would've been midwinter.

Q2: Yes, I ... I'm thinking this is probably not on the Arctic?

A: No. What you've seen here is my standard out of the box slideshow that I give if people want to see it. So the commentary ... If you go one slide back – just push on 'hold' ... You know, I talk about the ... Anyway, you saw the reverse footprints ... And then I talk about us getting back and being able to walk barefoot on the grass, which is amazing.

Q1: Who do you give these slideshows to? Just your friends, interested people?

A: Yes, every now and again, people will roll me out and say 'do an Antarctic slideshow' and so ... These are the slides I chose of thousands.

Q1: You still have a machine ...

A: Yes. It's such a schlep to scan every single one of the photos ... We were one of the last analogue teams. I took down the first digital camera at SANAE.

Q1: Really?!

A: It was a primitive little thing ...

Q1: Probably 1 Mega ...

A: One pixel!

Q1: One-pixel camera?

A: Yes, probably a one-by-one pixel; you should see the colour! You know, we had the darkroom and we would buy thousands of Rands' worth of chemicals and we would process this all ourselves. The darkroom now is probably just a storeroom.

Q1: I think so.

A: It's ... yes.

Q1: But when all these construction people left – and I suppose you didn't get that much visits in the winter – how was it then? All this activity, and then suddenly, nothing.

A: How was it, the change? It is a big change, but I think, for us, it was a relief, because that first summer of construction was so intense and such hard work. It was a relief to just

reduce the intensity a little bit. We weren't able to relax yet, because we still had so much to do to prepare the base for winter, but I think, amongst all of us, there was just a sense of 'okay, great; now we can be together as a team for the first time' – so, relieved. When the change-over crew arrived at the end of the winter, there was a sense of them as sort of outsiders coming in and intruding on our place ... It wasn't that bad; you know, we were happy to see them – different I guess from most normal teams, because we had worked so closely with them and so hard with them that we'd established good relationships with these people, 'cause again, there were a lot of Public Works guys who came down. So they were our friends and associates who returned, rather than a bunch of strangers, whereas in a normal change-over – I imagine, never having been through one – the over-wintering team arrives; they just form a unit with the previous over-wintering team; have a lot less to do with the summer crew, and probably don't have that same set of relationships that we had. That said, the take-over crew are briefed very carefully to respect the space of the over-wintering team; they say 'Hey listen, these guys aren't very well adjusted to society; you have to just ... ' And you could see – I was quite amused by it, because they try so hard, and I was saying 'guys, you don't have to be that sensitive; we know you guys, don't worry about it'. But that they're very sensitive and they don't want to step on any toes. We all got sick – you know, we hadn't been exposed to any outside germs for a year, and suddenly a year's worth of flu and cold germs arrive and everyone had a few weeks ... all the members of my team had a few weeks of coughs and colds and sneezes, which is apparently just totally normal.

Q1: But that time, when the first construction ... when they left for the winter, was that team member you spoke about already acting a bit on his own, isolating himself?

A: At the beginning or at the end of the first take-over?

Q1: At the end of the first take-over.

A: He was a difficult fellow from the start. You know, in his interview, in his selection interview, when they asked him 'why do you want to go to Antarctica?', his answer was 'to be alone' – bad answer.

Q1: Bad, bad answer.

A: But he was a competent engineer and so he was chosen purely for his technical ability – and like I said, you know, invited back again to run a take-over, where he ... He was doing a take-over for SANAE 37-38. Have you met Duncan Cromarty?

Q1: No, not yet.

A: A wonderful fellow. He was the expedition leader for SANAE 38 and he and this guy that I'm talking about had a massive argument as well during that take-over. Which just showed that there were good reasons why the team had said 'don't bring him back'.

Q1: Were you specifically chosen as team leader?

A: Yes.

Q1: Was that the position that you applied for?

A: No. In those days, leader was a position all of its own. One of my recommendations in my expedition report was that it should be combined with another position. I doubt it was exclusively because of my recommendation – I don't think they took me that seriously – but it was probably an overwhelming weight of opinion saying it should be leader plus something; draw the leader out of one of the other positions. I'm not sure when they changed. I know SANAE 37, SANAE 38, there was a dedicated leader ...

Q1: I think it was SANAE 40 only ...

A: Okay. Then they started having others ... So, in my case, I hadn't ever really applied for the expedition. I was at law school; I was an engineer – I still had an email account on the engineering server; there was an email that went out to everyone saying they're looking for an electrical engineer ... I hadn't practised as an engineer for years; I just contacted Susan Vosloo to say 'geez, tell me what South Africa's doing down there' – I was just intrigued; I wanted to know more. I had articles at a law firm; I was going to be a lawyer in a few months. And so she said 'well, tell me about yourself' and next thing, I had my CV; I was going for interviews; they were taking me very seriously and ... I like to joke that I was being interviewed as the engineer, but because I was such a pathetic engineer, they made me leader instead.

Q1: Did you have to write exams down there, if you were still busy with you articles?

A: I did ... Well, I was still busy with my LLB, my actual studies – I hadn't even got to articles. So I arranged with UNISA to study down there and ... It took quite a few phone calls to ... most people said 'no, it's impossible', till I found one person at UNISA who said 'let's see what we can do'. And in the team after me, they also brought some UNISA courses down – I'm not sure whether people are still doing UNISA courses down there, but we established the southernmost UNISA exam centre. So I wrote my exams down there. And one of my fellow team members, Piet Swanevelder was my invigilator, and he watched me to make sure I wasn't cheating and then I did my exam and then it was, I can't remember if it was faxed up to Pretoria or sent with the ship, or whatever ...

Q1: When did you find time to study though?

A: Oh, there was a lot of time. There's a lot of time. In the winter, you have a couple of hours' work a day, if that, and ... geez, I mean, I watched more movies there; I read more books; I drank more than I'd ever done before or since.

- A:** You know, life in the base ... In the winter you've got whatever your duties are, so I had some of my own experiments that I was running; there was a bit of admin work; once every 10 days you have skivvy duty – you know about skivvy duty?
- Q1:** Yes. How did you work with the cooking then? Did you have team evening meals, team suppers?
- A:** Yes. So one compulsory meal for everyone to attend; that was the dinner, every day. The rest of the time people could do their own things. So, you know, breakfast people would amble in at whatever time and make themselves whatever breakfast – normally you would see a couple of people sitting around together having breakfast or lunch.
- Q1:** How did sleeping patterns work? I've heard that in winter time – or even in summer – your sleeping patterns are sometimes totally confused ... your biorhythms.
- A:** In the summer, you have 24 hours light, but it's easy enough to get darkness – you go into the room and you close the blinds. So it's less disruptive, and also your patterns are generally dictated by the routines on the base, because there were work hours; there's daily breakfast and ... So very little disruption in the summer; just we were – especially in the first summer – we were sleep deprived, because we were working so hard. Then once we were left alone, the days were getting shorter and shorter; it was amazing: there was one night that suddenly, all of us, our clocks, just lost it and we found all ten of us sitting down together in the dining room going 'we can't sleep'. And it was amazing how it was synchronised; that we reached a certain point where there just wasn't enough sunlight in the day to keep your clock properly set and thereafter everyone's routines kind of drifted a little bit from each other. Some people would wake up a whole lot later; some people have more sleep; some people have less sleep. But it is very disruptive not having the sun every day to reset your clock.
- Q1:** Back then, how was the communication with South Africa? Did you have email accounts, telephone calls?
- A:** Yes. For a phone, we had the Pretoria phone number through a satellite; we had very low bandwidth Internet, so we couldn't surf the Web, but we I know, it was hard.
- Q2:** Oh no!
- A:** I know; it was hard. ... But remember, this is 1997, so there's not a lot of Web to surf.
- Q1:** No You Tube?!
- A:** No. No, definitely not. So we had email, which ... we would be able to keep in touch. We had ... The Mail & Guardian emailed us their newspaper every week. That was the only regular newspaper that we had. Because the Mail & Guardian was really the first online newspaper in the country. The others didn't have any online presence. So they had their email product and they were happy to donate it to us down there.

- Q1:** But how was it receiving news from back in South Africa? It was still quite unstable back then ... or?
- A:** No. No, we had local phone calls, so we were able to stay in touch. During the summer, when there were a lot more people on the base, the access to the phone was obviously more limited, because everyone wants to have their calls, so it was scheduled. But in the winter, it was really unlimited access. While were there, Princess Diana died.
- Q1:** Yes?
- A:** And that incident probably gave me the best sense of how removed we were from normal society, because it was like being on another planet and watching this earthlings go crazy about stuff that just meant so little to us down there.
- Q1:** Ja.
- A:** Every single time we spoke to anyone back home, all they wanted to tell us was about Princess Diana! We realised the world had lost its head about her! And ...
- Q1:** And afterwards probably, when you saw all the flowers and documentaries ... ?
- A:** *Ja*, we saw that and we were just so far removed from it ... You know, some people, I guess, in the team were more interested than others, but there was really a sense of being removed and watching this frenzy from, from afar. I don't know how old you guys were ...
- Q1:** Old enough to remember clearly. You know, you remember where you were when you received the news, kind of thing. It's like 9/11; you remember what you were doing.
- A:** Yes, very much like that. And so we just watched this frenzy and realised how removed we were normal society, that there's this global collective consciousness event happening and we were just saying 'please don't tell us more about it. 'Cause you know, we're really not interested'.
- Q1:** As team leader of the first team that stayed in this new base, which they promoted as quite, you know ... it's the ground-breaking base, etcetera. Did you ever receive a special directive from the Department of Environmental Affairs?
- A:** I don't think so. What's a "special directive"?
- Q1:** Something like ... Where they told you, "This is the new base; this and this should be done", or "You are a representative of South Africa, so do this and do that."
- A:** Not with quite that level of formality. I think that was just implicit in the day to day work. I spent a few months working in Pretoria, at Environmental Affairs' Head Office, before I went down there. And ... you know ... that was part of the daily discussion, but there was never any formality, like 'you're being invested with this great responsibility'.
- Q1:** Okay.

A: I remember I had to get security clearance as leader. And I had this questionnaire form that I had to fill in and I was happy to give information about myself, but then it wanted personal information about friends and family, and I said 'it's bullshit; why should I invade the privacy of my friends? I'm not doing this'. And they said 'well, then you're not getting your security clearance'. I go 'okay'. And then they sort of ... they stepped back and went 'okay'. I guess that's alright then'. I think there was a ... You know, we were really in a state of transition from very old, Broederbond style, where this was this was the *trots* of South Africa and probably thinking about this as some military significance, or something, to realising this is a civilian project; you don't need security clearance, for heaven's sake. Well, that's what I'm assuming. Maybe if I had got my security clearance, I would have found out some stuff. But I assume not. You know, there was this change in consciousness. Times were changing and ... Remember, during the Apartheid years, the Antarctic Treaty System in SANAE was very important for South Africa, because we weren't excluded; there were sanctions that were excluding us from almost everything else, but the Antarctic Treaty System ... through the Cold War, Russia and America sat on it and cooperated the whole way; South Africa remained on it, so ...

Q1: They tried to keep it as apolitical as ...

A: Yes, and it which was done very successfully, and that's part of the success of the Antarctic Treaty System. From South Africa's perspective, it was maybe a bit of a backdoor into diplomatic circles that we were otherwise excluded from. And so perhaps for those reasons there was a sense of its strategic importance. And now this was changing because, we had been invited back into the global community, and it was just one other place where we were interacting with the rest of the world.

Q1: Did you have things like – speaking of the military made me think about this ... Did you have things like ... Were there guns on base, or straightjackets, or things like that?

A: No. I wish there were straightjackets! I would've liked to have locked a few people in it. No weapons – under the Antarctic Treaty, you're not allowed any, and we certainly didn't have any; none that I was aware of. And no straightjackets ... Geez, I don't know, among the medics' supplies if maybe there was one somewhere; if we'd dug deep enough, we could have found something. But no, nothing sinister like that.

Q1: And speaking about medical supplies, how was it to see this relationship develop between the medic and ...

A: It was very entertaining.

Q2: Did they try to hide it? Obviously ...

A: Well, I think the rest of us were aware of it before they were. Both of them quite conservative and ... You know, we could see ... I really ... I don't want it to sound in any way patronising, but we could see sort of quite a naive kind of romance developing between

them, and ja before I think they were ready to acknowledge it to themselves or to anyone else. And then they reached a certain critical point where 'fine'; they were happy and they were out with it. And they'd walk along, hand in hand – it was unbelievable. They walked around the whole time holding hands! Like they'd walk on the narrow passage ways, and they'd go up the stairs holding hands. And you know, the rest of us were joking; we'd joke about ... 'oh, my God; they're holding hands again!' And then their relationship progressed and they'd start sharing a room, but then they were trying to do it very discreetly. And then less and less discreetly ... So during the change-over, everyone was sharing rooms. So Amy was sharing it with ... What was the name of the Durban physicist? ... Belinda ... maybe. So Amy was sharing with another woman, Hein was sharing with another guy; so then they would use the hospital as their little rendez-vous place. You know, we'd find that sometimes the hospital door would be locked and we couldn't find them – they were inside the hospital!

Q1: But it sounds like it didn't really cause any jealousy or disruption in the team as a whole.

A: No. Heaven, no. There hadn't been any competition for Amy's affections – which I guess would have been how it could have been divisive, but there wasn't anyone else competing for that, and so it worked fine; it worked well. If it did add to the social dynamic, it would have been that in the social interactions and the dynamics within the team, now they were a unit, and if there were any issues, we knew that they would behave as one. You know, one had to weary of that. And an insult or injury to one would be an insult and injury to the other. We were sponsored with a whole bunch of *goeters* from ... Ster-Kinekor gave us movies and we got wine and a whole bunch of different things, and there were ... At the end of our winter, we decided to donate some of the stuff to the base and to share out the rest of the loot. And we had a whole sort of bidding system, because there were certain things that everyone wanted – and they sort of coordinated their bidding together. They were quite strategic about it. So they were really pooling their stuff, and had a clear idea in their minds then that they were going to be together afterwards ... the fact that they were pooling their property.

Q1: If there was any conflict in the team – what mostly caused conflict?

A: There was conflict. Without a doubt, there was conflict. Probably the root cause was just bunch of different people being forced together in a stressful environment. What the particular symptoms were in every case differed. I'm trying to think if there were any recurring themes. You know, as leader, I would find myself often in the midst of the conflict ... There was that one guy who had a ... just problems with dealing with any form of authority; there was another one who just was very immature. There were two people in our team who everyone – well, the majority – recommended shouldn't have been there, or shouldn't be invited on too. And they were often in the middle of the conflict. I was 25; I had no formal work experience; I'd had no formal management experience, and I'm very

comfortable now admitting that I just didn't have the repertoire of management skills to deal with the situation. You know, it's a very challenging management environment – far more than a normal environment here, where at the end of the day you get to go home and leave everyone. You know, I've learned many lessons as a leader and a manager since; I understand the mistakes that I made that I could have done a better job of just defusing conflict, avoiding conflict. Like I said earlier, with the whole selection process of *Omgewingsake*, I would never have put myself ... I would never have put myself, put a 25-year-old, without management experience, into that position. I just wouldn't have done it. It doesn't matter how smart and capable he looks; you don't put someone in that position. But with that said, I think we did okay as a team. I did okay as a leader. I don't think we were the best team ever; we certainly weren't the worst team ever. There are some teams ... One gets a sense of having an incredible affinity and *gees* ... I think SANAE 37, seemed to have that. They remained very cohesive, and I think a lot of it was ... Well, they didn't have the rough start that we had. They were a team from the start. They came in; we looked after them as a team and helped them. But also the personalities involved ... Paul van Staden – I don't know if you've been in touch with him; he lives in Chicago now – very charismatic guy. He had a lot of experience as a manager as well, and he did a fantastic job of moulding them as a team. And even now, when he visits the country, they'll have a reunion; they'll all get together.

Q1: Just quickly, because we don't have a lot time left ... On that point, career wise, would you say it was a good decision?

A: For me?

Q1: Yes.

A: Yes.

Q1: Yes. What did you learn? What did you take back from that experience on Antarctica?

A: I learned about leadership and management. If I had to distil it into one single most important lesson, I'd say leading is as much about knowing when to do nothing as it is about knowing what to do if you have to do something. So there were two benefits for me. One was the experience, the learning – I'm just talking about professionally now – understanding how, you have to deal with different people differently; it's not one size fits all. The second benefit is just the branding – it's quite impressive to stick on your CV "Expedition Leader", and I hadn't anticipated how long that would stick with me. Even now, it's something that people notice and pick up on. Work colleagues and associates, when we're meeting partners or whoever, very often they'll say "And he led the expedition to Antarctica; he lived there for a year and a half!" You know, it's a conversation point. But also it just seems to carry some pedigree and branding with it.

Q1: And personally?

A: Personally as well ... Friends whom I've known for, for years will still bring it up and ask about it amongst newer friends, you know, it will get brought up and I'll have to sit and talk about it. People are understandably fascinated by it, and as much as it can get boring talking about it, I think there's a responsibility. It's such an honour and privilege to have been able to go down there and had such a long and intense experience of it. There's a responsibility to, to share it. You know, people ask me ... They say, "Well, who pays for this?" And my answer is "You did, thank you."

Q1: The tax payer...!

A: Yes, and as such I think that there's a responsibility to share it and I'm glad of the work you're doing, because it's part of sharing that heritage. There's been a massive investment of money and human capital, and that does need to be shared. And I think it's a source of pride for South Africa; it's a source of essentially great experience and knowledge that need to be shared. Really, people should be applying in their thousands and being turned away.

Q1: Last question for now: how would you describe Antarctica?

A: Tough question, because, you know, like in terms of what? In terms of the ...

Q1: Whatever terms come up in your mind first.

A: Well, alien. It's an alien place. You ... It's just unlike anything you've experienced before. It's beautiful; it's subtle. You ... I learned there I like stark environments. When you're in a place like this, there's so much sensory input all around you that you can get lazy. When you're there, you're forced to focus on the minute detail – subtle changes of colour and shade over the surface of the ice; the ripples in the ice; the cycles of the sun and the moon ... You start becoming so tuned to such subtleties, which you lose in more lush and tropical environments, because there's so much ... It's fragile, you know – as vast and even hostile as it is, you get a sense of its fragility. Anywhere you go, you can immediately see the signs of human impact. You drive a vehicle deep into the interior to set up a depot for the geologists, and the ... if the vehicle's been idling for a while, you see soot on this otherwise virgin snow, and you realise 'I put that there'. Suddenly it spews out some antifreeze and you have this bright green square. Anything you do, you see an immediate impact and you realise how fragile it is. ... It's fun; it's a great playground! For anyone with any sense of adventure, it's an incredible place just to go and play. ... How's that? It that enough adjectives?

Q1: That's enough adjectives. Yes, that's a beautiful description. Okay, thank you very much.

Q2: Thanks.

A: You're welcome.

END OF TRANSCRIPTION