

HUGH PURDON

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Place: Marion Island
Interviewer (Q): Dora Scott | Antarctic Legacy Project | C-I-B | Stellenbosch University
Respondent (A): Hugh Purdon | Marion 67 | 2010 | Sealer

Q: Tell me, what's your team number and the year?

A: Marion 67, and we're here for the 2010/2011 ...

Q: And what exactly do you do?

A: I'm a sealer.

Q: Okay. How did it happen that you applied to go?

A: My sister's a sealer, and she sent me an email while she was on the island, saying that they were struggling to get a fourth sealer down, 'cause one sealer pulled out before they even got to the island. So she said, why don't you apply? And I said okay ...

Q: And here you are.

A: And here I am! Yes.

Q: Did you ever have an interest in the islands before you came here?

A: Not before; not before Jean applied for it, and she said I'm going to Marion Island, so then I heard about it and I looked at it and I watched the ...

Q: And you became aware ... ?

A: Yes ... the SABC production; I can't remember what it was called ...

Q: Marion 101, I think.

A: Something like that, yes.

Q: So you didn't actually know much about the island before you came here?

A: I didn't even know that South Africa went to Antarctica!

Q: Ah ... ?

A: Yes.

Q: Now describe the team preparations that you did for the year ... But you didn't do any, did you?

A: Nothing.

Q: Nothing? Did you have to do any preparation?

A: They just said ... Well, pretty much, Nico and Chris Oosthuizen, they said to me ... They gave me a work book and then they said this is what you'll be expected to do, and showed me how to tag a seal, on pictures and a slide show – they showed me killer whales, and I was like ah, that's amazing, blah, blah, blah; and then they said okay ...

Q: There you go!

A: There you go. It took about two hours!

Q: Did you know anything about seals before you came here?

A: No. I had seen seals before; I'd never seen an Elephant seal; never seen a killer whale ... But I had seen some... I think they were African Fur seals, or Cape Fur seals, rather.

Q: Okay, so you sort of had a vague idea of what you were getting yourself into?

A: Ye ... they look like dogs, but ...

Q: Well, they make the sound of dogs!

A: Yes, that's about it!

Q: Okay. So, you took the Agulhas down?

A: Yes.

Q: Who was the captain?

A: Gavin.

Q: Gavin?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. So how was the sea journey? You came with a lot of PWD guys, right?

A: I came on a construction voyage, yes, in August. And it was a rough one; supposedly it was rough, yes. But other than that, nothing much happened. I came down also with Greg.

Q: Oh yes.

A: Yes. So nothing much happened during that trip.

Q: So it was just ... What did you do? Did you sleep ... ? Were you seasick?

A: No, I wasn't seasick.

Q: Oh, you ...

A: Didn't sleep; well, I slept most of the time, but then, after a while, you get too much of sleep. There wasn't that many people. It was mostly PWD guys and they had their own little party upstairs.

- Q:** Yes, because ... ?
- A:** And the rest of the time, we were ... It was ... Yes, a pretty quiet trip.
- Q:** Didn't anything interesting happen on this journey down?
- A:** No, not really, besides plates flying everywhere in the rough seas and stuff ...
- Q:** Ah, okay.
- A:** Yes, nothing.
- Q:** So when you arrived, what were your first thoughts?
- A:** Well, when I first saw the island, I thought we were going into Jurassic Park! I thought no ways! I've got to walk around that! I had no idea ... Then I got here, and I was dressed, full-Gortexed, three jerseys, gloves, beany ... Jump out at the island – oh, it's quite warm here! Yes, and then walked through a mire and ... still just mostly a daze, just thinking what on earth am I doing here? You know – what's going happen? Have I got enough stuff? You know, stuff like that.
- Q:** Did you feel prepared, or were you sort of ... ?
- A:** Yes, I never felt underprepared. I've never even actually felt out of my depth, which is weird; but yes. The preparedness, I think, is just ... I wanted to get away and have an adventure, and so ...
- Q:** And have you?
- A:** Yes, yes! So the whole preparedness-thing didn't really matter, because it was just out there; have a blast.
- Q:** Did it help to have your sister here in terms of having her tell you what's happening and what's up?
- A:** Yes. Well, if she hadn't just said to me, look, this is what you need – you need to buy innersoles ... If I hadn't done a whole bunch of shopping with her, I would've been completely lost – maybe that's why I felt prepared as well.
- Q:** Yes, because you physically had someone feeding you information from the island before you came.
- A:** Yes.
- Q:** Okay. Now ... So you basically arrived in the middle of ... Had they moved base when you arrived?
- A:** No.
- Q:** Not yet?

- A:** No, we were still living in the old base. So I moved into Sandton and spent three months – August ... yes; three months there about; just over three months, and then we moved at about the end of October, beginning of November, I think.
- A:** Yes, just before you guys came down on that ship.
- Q:** Okay, so it was still sort of unsettled?
- A:** Yes.
- Q:** And how was it to arrive in a strange place and to try and live somewhere and make it your home, and then to have to move to a completely different place?
- A:** Well, it wasn't that bad for me, because when I arrived everything was new. And then we started the breeding season, and then I was just away. I had ...
- Q:** Very busy?
- A:** ... tiny amounts of time at base, you know. And when I was at base, I was either sleeping or eating, so it wasn't really that much of an issue. And then I moved to the new base, and I was like okay. The only problem was that we had to move during our breeding season, and that caused a huge amount of stress for everyone, on top of our normal stress, yes.
- Q:** Yes, all the normal pressure of the breeding season ... Now, please describe a day in the life of a sealer. What exactly does it entail?
- A:** Ooph ... that's a difficult one.
- Q:** Well, I know it obviously depends on the season ...
- A:** Which ... yes.
- Q:** But I you described different seasons ... what you do?
- A:** Yes ... Okay well, there's pretty much ... We do the Elephant seal censuses, which is the main reason why we're here, I suppose – it's been going for 25 years; 25 to 30 years, somewhere around there. And we just go and check tags – see which seals are out and which seals are not, pretty much. And we tag all the newborn pups on the island. And now that we've got four sealers, we're doing much more intensive killer whale observations, so we look for killer whales quite a lot. Yes, and also a lot of Fur seal work – tagging, tracking ... stuff like that. So we would pretty much do all the stuff: we would catch the Fur seals; we'd tag the Elephant seals; we would put devices on Elephant seals; put devices on Fur seals ... Yes, so it's a lot of hands-on, cool stuff.
- Q:** Have you ever been bitten?
- A:** Yes ... yes!

- Q:** Oh-oh ... ! Did you take a photograph and send it to Marthan?
- A:** No, actually I didn't ... I didn't have time to take a photograph! It wasn't that bad a bite ... but also, you get bitten all the time on your hands by pups, 'cause you have to weigh the Fur seals pups and they don't like being picked up!
- Q:** How much do they weigh?
- A:** They start off at about 6 kg and ...
- Q:** When they're born?
- A:** Yes ... well, probably a bit less; 4, 5 ... maybe 5 kgs, and up to 18, 19 kg; yes.
- Q:** So how exactly does the season work? When does ... Breeding season is in August?
- A:** Peak breeding season, when most Elephant seals are out, is October 15th. That's when we do our whole round-island census.
- Q:** Oh, okay.
- A:** And that's when everything starts going crazy, because from there on, the maximum amount of females are out. They fall out then and the pups start weaning. So they stop suckling and the mothers go back to the sea. And then we have to start weighing the pups.
- Q:** While they remain behind?
- A:** Yes. And then we have to keep on censusing, and then we have to tag the pups from then on 'til about ...
- Q:** Do the pups stay on the beach and then there's a beach master to sort of watch over them? Or how does it work?
- A:** No, the beach master watches over his females.
- Q:** Okay, so he doesn't care about the pups?
- A:** He doesn't care about the pups.
- Q:** Okay.
- A:** Yes ... Actually, he does care a bit. It's weird ... The one at Trypot, if you started playing with a pup – you want to tag it and weigh it – he would come out and chase you away. And nothing can distract him from doing that. But he was the only one from the entire thing, so it was weird.
- Q:** That's very strange.
- A:** Yes.
- Q:** What are the challenges of living on an island like this?

- A:** The main challenge was the mental toughness of sitting in this nice warm base and then thinking I have to go out in that weather and walk for the whole day, censing, being freezing cold, and, you know, having not a nice time, to another place, and knowing that you had to do it and there was no way of getting out of it!
- Q:** Did you stay in the huts a lot?
- A:** Yes, quite a bit.
- Q:** Do you like the huts?
- A:** Yes, I love the huts. The huts are awesome.
- Q:** Do you have a favourite one?
- A:** It has to be Mixed Pickle.
- Q:** Why?
- A:** Because we stayed there so often.
- Q:** Okay.
- A:** Yes, we do try to get attendance patterns there and we stayed a week to 10 days there at a time, by ourselves, with the pups.
- Q:** Great!
- A:** Yes. And so we get to know the pups pretty well there.
- Q:** Do they have sort of personalities and that kind of thing?
- A:** Yes, they all have separate personalities, which is awesome.
- Q:** That's cool. So ... Do you have any animal related stories? Adventures that you had, chased by mean ... ?
- A:** Yes, I suppose ... Tristan's got the best ones, but ... I've got a few where I was standing, watching for tags at a harem, and standing there happily, and this female charged me and Tristan ... luckily, he stuck a stick in her mouth and distracted her slightly. But then she still bit my leg – luckily it was only like a passing blow.
- Q:** Ooh ...
- A:** Yes. And so he ... I think he saved my entire leg, which was nice of him!
- Q:** Very nice indeed!
- A:** Yes, cool stuff like that ...
- Q:** So, you came sort of as an outsider, and you come in and you just join this team. How was it to first meet your teammates? Because they'd already formed a relationship with one another, and then you and Greg came in. How was ... ?

- A:** I think it was really easy for me, because of Jean. She was like a social bridge and maybe I'm ... I don't know. It wasn't that difficult for me. I think Greg was more apprehensive about than I was. But I was just ... walked in, and Jean was like my bridge to them. And she was ... She helped me out a lot; I used to follow her around all over the show until I worked out what was going on.
- Q:** Okay. And what was the ... generally, throughout the year, how's the team dynamics been?
- A:** It's been pretty good, hey. Yes, I mean, you always have your issues, and some people you like and some people you don't like, but we haven't had any serious bust-ups at all.
- Q:** That's good.
- A:** Yes, the main stress with the team dynamics was when I first arrived, was the whole moving. It was a weird time, because I didn't know anyone that well. Everyone got really uptight about moving and how it was handled. And yes ... I don't know if it just was the island getting to them, or if it was handled wrong. I personally think it was handled wrong, but ... yes.
- Q:** Did you ... Having arrived and getting into your routine and getting on with your work, did you interact with the PWD guys a lot, or not really?
- A:** No, not at all.
- Q:** So they didn't really interfere with what you were doing? They went sort of ahead and did whatever it is that they did?
- A:** Yes, that was all this side anyway.
- Q:** Oh, okay.
- A:** They all lived in the new base, and we were all in the old base. They only came over for supper and then they came back here. So ... They tried to get us to interact, but then ... yes, the contractors got a bit excessively drunk every time we went over and sometimes it got a bit out of hand, so we kind of stopped ... yes!
- Q:** And now it's like dealing with DEA, having a constant presence from them?
- A:** It hasn't really affected me that much, except during that move there. Yes, that sucked. I didn't like them here! It really wasn't cool at all ... yes.
- Q:** So how did the vibe differ from the old base and now in the new base? Because it's a whole different environment ...
- A:** Yes ... Well, the vibe was really stressed in the old base – I didn't see them without the DEA here the whole time, so ... The new base, it seems a lot more social, but that's maybe because I'm here, at the base, more often than I was during breeding

season. But it seems that people hang out a lot more and watch movies together a lot more. But yes .. in the old base ... people stayed in their rooms a lot more, I think.

Q: So what did you do for relaxation?

A: We used to watch movies a lot; watch movies and read books ... Pretty much; yes.

Q: But you were here for the Maid Marion competition?

A: Yes.

Q: How was that?

A: Ah, it was awesome; crazy! Yes, it was a bit ... wow! But ... yes.

Q: What did you do?

A: Well, we all dressed up as pretty much prostitutes, so ... Great, yes! I wore a very short skirt with fishnet stockings ...

Q: Ah ...

A: And a blond wig, which I seem to have lost.

Q: Not the one in the bar maybe?

A: It could be ... Maybe it is!

Q: You should check it out ...

A: On the top of ... ?

A: Yes! Us sealers are representing ... Last year, it was Dereck who was Maid Marion, and now it was Tristan and I who was first and second princess, so ...

Q: And Cobus won, right?

A: Cobus won, yes.

Q: Why did he win? What made him a better candidate than you?

A: I don't know ... He got into the character, you know. I don't know what it was – he had a cigarette and he looked like this fancy European chick, and we were just prostitutes ... ! Cobus looked classy! I think chicks like classy guys, and Cobus looked classy!

Q: You mean chicks like classy chicks?!

A: Well, classy chicks ... yes, I suppose. And the rest of us were wearing very revealing...!

Q: What was the most difficult thing about your year, or your few months?

A: I don't know ... I think, maybe ... I'm wanting to say moving ... yes, it has to be that, I suppose. Moving from the old base to the new base, with the whole ... with Adriaan

doing his slave-driving thing and making us do stuff that we didn't have time or energy or willpower to do.

Q: What kind of stuff?

A: We had to move the entire mammal lab.

Q: Like all the equipment?

A: On like the 18th of October ... I don't know. Sometime between the 15th of October and November, he said we had to move it.

Q: So you all had to go and carry equipment from that side ... ?

A: Yes. And eventually, we were like, no; can't do it. We told him look dude, it's impossible. You know, we're barely just getting through our breeding season as it is, you can't make us do that. Luckily he said okay, just before the ship arrives, so we managed to do it by then; yes.

Q: And what was the easiest thing?

A: The easiest thing ... Wow, I've never been asked that before! Easiest thing ... ?

Q: Or the most pleasant thing?

A: Oh, getting to know the team then. Yes, I think I've got friends for life here now. Yes, which is awesome.

Q: Nice. And your time here ... what did you learn?

A: I learned that there's a lot of things that I can do that I previously thought I couldn't. Yes, you learn to think oh, yes, wow; I'm not that stupid; I'm not that slow; I'm not that weak, you know – all sorts of things like that. You can actually do stuff; yes.

Q: And what will you miss about the island?

A: The team; yes, definitely.

Q: Do you ever consider coming for another year?

A: I don't know. I said to everyone before takeover came, I said I'm not doing this again! But now it's actually dawned on me that I actually have to go home, so I don't know ... But I don't know what it will be like if I have another team though – I think that will be one of the main sticking points.

Q: Yes, a whole different approach ...

A: Yes, different people. I mean, maybe this team has been completely ... They're like a complete anomaly ...

Q: Now, we have the research base here. Why do you think it's important to have the base here, and why do you think the research being done here is important?

- A:** Well, it's quite a unique place to do research, I suppose. I'm not really a scientist. In my layman mind, it's like wow, if we're not looking after these animals down here, no else is going to be. So how do we know that what we're doing further up north is affecting them; and if it is affecting them, then it's probably a bad thing for us further up north to ... You know, so if all these animals die out, then what's going wrong with our oceans? And oceans feed a large part of the world, so ... Yes, it could cause a ... I think it's really important actually; yes.
- Q:** Describe Marion.
- A:** Describe it? Ah ... completely inhospitable and beautiful, I suppose. Yes, it's got that haunting ruggedness that scares you, but also puts you in awe of it, I suppose.
- Q:** Nice. Is there anything you'd like to add? Any incidents you want to tell us about?
- A:** Incidents?! This is the famous part, is it?
- Q:** Yes, it is; this is your opportunity to make it big ... !
- A:** Ah, not really, except for that move, which I've ... Yes, I've said before ...
- Q:** Any positive incidents that you will look back on with fondness, maybe?
- A:** ... Maid Marion! No, there's been so many; it's hard to count. The end of breeding season, Jean, Tristan and I sat at Ship's Cove. And we each opened a beer and we thought well, you know, that's it; we've done it! We've done the impossible. You know, everyone said the breeding season is the most ... the hardest time of your year, and we'd just finished our last Friday census, and everything, you know ... just got all the data. And we were sitting there and we going, you know, we've actually survived this – we're still alive; no one got seriously injured; yes – and we got as much of the data as we possibly could. It's a good feeling; one of the better feelings I've had. Yes; it's awesome.
- Q:** That's great.
- A:** Yes.
- Q:** Just to get back to the census ... So you then collect the tag numbers with the data...?
- A:** Yes.
- Q:** And then what do you do with the information?
- A:** Well, each year has a specific colour code, so when every year's born, it's a different cohort. So this year, our cohort was green-red. So last year was orange-blue; the previous year was flame black, and then it was lemon-brown. And they go from 0 to or 1 to about 500, so there's about 500 pups born every year. And so then we get to know every year which seals are out and which seals are breeding.

- Q:** And which seals came back to a specific place?
- A:** Yes.
- Q:** Okay.
- A:** So that's where we collect it and see who's mating with who and which females are getting pups, and stuff like that; yes.
- Q:** And then you put it in a database?
- A:** Yes, a big database; and then some poor guy who's doing his Masters or PhD has to sift through it all and find out ... and read all the patterns and stuff! And whether they're succeeding or not succeeding, yes.
- Q:** Brilliant. Thanks. Anything else you'd like to add?
- A:** I don't know! I might come to you later and say I forgot that ... !
- Q:** Okay, brilliant; that's it.
- A:** Cool; thanks, Dora.
- Q:** Thanks, Hugh.