

PAUL LEE

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Location: SA Agulhas, early 40 degrees
Interviewer (Q): Lize-Marie van der Watt | History Department | Stellenbosch University
Respondent (A): Paul Lee | SANAE 50 | Team Leader | Meteorologist

Q: This is an oral history interview with Paul Lee. The Team Leader of SANAE 50 on tour on the Agulhas, somewhere in the forties, early forties. My first question to you would be: Why did you decide to go? Was it a decision? Were you asked?

A: It was a decision from my side initially. It has been a boyhood dream. I always wanted to go. Right from school days. I read all the explorer books, read everything there could be about the Antarctic and then... Just the way life takes its turns. I could not go because of various commitments to family and studies and so it has been shelved. I think there is a period in your life when you can go, which is maybe straight after University or school, and then there is a period in your life, when you can't go. And I have just emerged from that, my children left home a few years ago, my wife has taken on a whole new career, which she is very interested in here. She needs a good year on her own to get that launched and I reached a point of being fifty in my life, when I realised that if I didn't do this, it might not happen. So ja all those factors came together and I then approached the Department of Environment and Tourism and put in an application which got accepted. I didn't realise it would. I was actually quite shocked.

Q: So you applied directly to the DA, you didn't apply via a source or...

A: No, what happened...? I did not really know how to apply. And initially I actually phoned up Don Pinnock, who had written the book, and said: "Don, I really want to go". I didn't know him. I introduced myself to him said: "I really want to go to Antarctica". I had no idea of being the leader. I wanted to go down in a scientific capacity. And I had done my Honours degree in Climatology at UCT, many, many years before. So the DEAT said to me: "Make an application to the South-African Weather Services and come down as the Met Officer. And from that... getting that post and becoming the Met Officer, the DEAT then asked me, if I would take the team-leadership as well.

Q: Was that a decision you had to ponder over or did it come quite easily?

A: I did not think of it for a moment. I was honoured to get it. And took it on straight away. I am not sure it's been a good idea; after all, there are a lot of responsibilities. But, no, no, it is a good idea and, ja, I think it is a privileged.

Q: You said it that it has been a boyhood dream, you have read the books. How were you exposed to the books? Was it from school? Was it your parents?

A: That is an interesting question that I have never thought about. There was one book that my mother gave me, which was the deciding factor in what you just said. And it is a book, [Sir Vivian books... The big... I forget how they labelled it, but... Sir Edmond Hillary and Vivian across the Antarctica. Trans Antarctic. And I never read the book, my mother gave it to me, and it was the pictures in the books, of the cats crossing the crevasses. It never left me and even when I see those same pictures today, it still just jolts me back to being fifteen. And I would say that book and those photographs in that book are absolutely... triggered it for me. Ja, it became imprinted.

Q: In terms of preparation, what does the team leader have to do?

A: There hasn't been much preparation that the team leaders had to do, other than, that is different to what the team has had to do. Most of my work has been similar to the team, other than, right at the beginning; the Department did sit me down for about a three hour introduction, into the protocols and the routines. And they gave me a massive big manual, which I took home and started to study. So along with studying for my particular job, of being the weatherman down there, I then had to look at what the team leader had to do. And other than reading the manual and familiarizing myself with what my duties would be when I got down there, there wasn't to much more preparation I could do. I had to write letters to the various team members, welcoming them. Because they were all in different parts of the country at that time. And telling them who I was and what my expectations were from them, over the, sort of, three months run up period. I had to also contact their families and loved ones, and tell them that I was team leader and that they needed to contact me...

Q: Was that part of your job?

A: It was part of my job to contact the families and the nearest of kin. Just to say who I was; I was the team leader. If they needed to contact me, they could do so. And asked them to send gifts down to me, for Christmases and Birthdays, so I had a few of those duties to do. But I think the main duty for me was... Oh, the other big duty was sponsorship. I had to get onto that. We had to try and get our team to have a logo, some T-shirts, some extra food and chocolates, some extra wine and booze.

Q: How do you go about that? I mean, what does... If someone sponsor you, say for instance wine, what do they get out of that?

A: Okay. Firstly there is a strict protocol that the DEAT put into place. That we could only apply the sponsorship, as the team SANAE 50 and that it wasn't the Department denying the sponsorship. So there was a differentiation between that. And then in terms of what we as the team could offer back to the sponsors, we could offer them photographs for limited usage in in-house in their organisations, but not for general media publication. We could offer them visuals on our websites, on our newsletters of their logos. I offered each of them a sort of slide show talk when I returned, and then gear testing. You know, we got lots of gear from First Ascent and from people like Garmin and people that... whose equipment we can actually run out there and test. Mountaineering equipment from Outward Ventures. So we offered them gear testing, which we are going to put onto our blogs and websites, and show them and tell them how we feel about it.

Q: You have some background in adventure-tourism?

A: Ja.

Q: What kind of background do you have?

A: Well, sort of my whole life has been dedicated to some form of adventure. I mean, If I was to sort of label myself as a, I don't know if I... I have kind of been an adventurer and an explorer, so the... Ja, it has been a lot of rivers and surf-skiing, long distance surf-skiing. I have gone around Cape Point five times on races. I have done the race from Port-Elizabeth to East-London, which is the longest surf-ski race in the world. I have climbed in the Alps. I have climbed in the Himalayas.

Q: So do you think this gave you some sort of background knowledge when it came to out here and to..?

A: Definitely. Definitely, it gave me. Firstly it gave me the credentials to be team leader to a certain degree, because I have done a lot of expedition leading. Secondly, when it came to gear itself, I kind of had some idea of what we should be looking for. Not that we were going to be taking on any high adventure here, in the Antarctica as such. But that I needed to know and I do know what the kind of appropriate gear is to wear and... So ja, my background covers a lot of it.

Q: Have you had contact with any previous team leaders?

A: Mainly team forty-nine, the current team. André Holmes, he has been amazingly helpful. In fact, André has been my biggest source of input, of information. Without a doubt. And I think if anything a team leader can do that is to feed back from the SANAE base to the next coming guy. That is a huge help. Because the DEAT are very, very involved in their personal work. Not personal work, but their functions. And they don't have a lot of time to spend on us. And I feel as team leader there is no point in sitting back and saying: "Oh, but the DEAT doesn't want to help me", or "can't answer these questions". You have got to get on with it yourself and find the source. And André was my source. So I spent a lot of time on the E-mails. I haven't spoken to him yet, haven't managed to call him up on the phone, which is quite weird. Every time I phone SANAE, he is out somewhere. A little busy. But André has been great and he has given me a huge amount of input, from what gear to bring, to what food, to what extras and how to hold the team together. And ja, I've had talks with other team leaders, on board this vessel now I have been speaking with team leaders. Just getting input. And around South- Africa I have spoken to one or two.

Q: The Climatology duties on base, you are going to be the head... only meteorologist, head meteorologist?

A: Ja. Ja, so indeed, they call me the senior meteorologist, but there is only one at SANAE, where is it at Gough and Marion, there is more. The work we do is observational, not forecasting. And that is quite strictly applied. It would be illegal for me, under my qualifications to do any forecasting or predictions for either a ship or aviation. If that gets called for they will refer to the South-African Weather Services and to the forecasting experts back in South-Africa, to make forecasts

for SANAE, the Antarctic. So I can't do that. What my job is to do, is to observe current weather, record it and to make sure that it is documented and sent in on time. And that is very much current weather, as it is happening. Temperatures, humidity, clouds, cloud heights, cloud types...

Q: So how are you going to work this? I mean, if you are the only meteorologist. Are you just going to work during night time observation?

A: Ja. Well we've got... A lot of it is automatic weather station difference. So we have got the AWS's, the Automatic Weather Stations. They will do a lot of the work. Each will do a lot of the work. I have to do the observations. Nobody can look at the... Ja, I have got to look at the clouds. But we work from the first observation, 06:00 GMT, and we run observations hourly, through till 12:00 GMT, that is lunch time basically. So the mornings will be very busy. Then there is a long gap, until 18:00 GMT when I do another observation. And then that is the final observation for the day.

Q: The time at SANAE, are you following GMT time anyway?

A: That's to be decided. I would like to follow GMT time, and I think that during handovers SANAE will be on GMT, I am pretty sure. A lot of my team members have asked if we could go back to South-African time, when everybody leaves. The reason they want to be on South-African time is, so that it is easier to correspond with people back at the Universities and back at the DEAT. So that is to be decided and I am not sure what the protocol is.

Q: Ja, ja. That is what I want to know. Is it something that each team can sort of arbitrarily decide?

A: I don't know yet. And that is something that I also need to find out. Otherwise if it is decided by a rule, I am sure it is going to be GMT. Which is where we are. We are two degrees West, so it is the most appropriate.

Q: It is the most appropriate, of this. I know you struggled to get some of the team members. What do you think is the reason for that?

A: I don't have any fixed... I don't have any formal reasons for it. I mean, I haven't been able to find out, indeed why? The team members we struggled to get, had been from a technical background. It may have something to do with the pay that is on offer. In the competitive sense that I think there is a lot of work out there for technical people in South-Africa. In the world. You know we are a resource driven world. The demand for mining, the demand for resources has touched that... mechanical engineers, electrical engineers are at such demand around South-Africa. I think these guys meet jobs everywhere and I think that is my best answer to it. Ja. And I think also it could be the factor, it is quite a commitment to go away for [fourteen] months. It may not be everybody's... Especially when you look at the more technical side. I think, the scientists men, they are more, sort of, driven for this adventure, but when it comes to technical people, they might say: "Well, I don't need that adventure. I am actually... You know, "I want a job and I want good money." And I think that is a factor in it as well.

Q: Do you know if they had a plan B, if they didn't find people on number ninety-nine?

A: The plan B was to fly the men on the last flight if possible, February. That would have happened there. So they still had a few months. It has been perfect to get them onto the ship, because we are able to incorporate them into the team a little late. But get them, sort of part of us. But at the very worst we could have held them until changeover and got them in on an air flight.

Q: The two team members that came, did they apply initially when the calls for applications first went out, or were they sort of sourced?

A: I actually don't know. You see, you will have to check that out. I think that they were more of sourced. I actually don't know. I haven't found that out from them yet.

Q: Are there in worries in your mind that they haven't been part of the team training.

A: Yes. Yes, I am worried about it. Certainly the team gelled on the team training. It was a unifying experience, where we got together and we started fire-fighting or driving the CAT, challenges around the yard and whole lot.

Q: Had fun a bit?

A: Ja, we had fun. We had meals and we got together. And that certainly brought us into being a coherent unit. Now we have got the two new members. Ja, you know, life is: making the best of the situation. And I don't expect anything down in the Antarctic is going to be perfect according to plan. I think that the Antarctic is naturally going to throw things at me and at the team, anyway. And this is the first of such things. But in answer to your question, it is certainly not perfect.

- Q:** And the team, as I said, is quite diverse, in terms of generations, in terms of cultures, in terms of languages. Are you going...? Do you have a special plan in place for that or are you just going to play it by ear?
- A:** Play it by ear, I think, could be the way. Ja, if things are planned it would be just to be aware of it, which I am. To be open minded about it. To realise that is our world. And tolerance, consensus decision making, democratic work, while still understanding that I am going to have to bare the brunt of the responsibility as team leader. I somehow gonna have to open stuff up democratically, to understand what... We have got... You know, we have got black and white; we have got different religions, from Jehovah witness to Catholic to Anglican. We have got Afrikaans and English culture. It's the potpourri of South-Africa, isn't it?
- Q:** It is?
- A:** It is.
- Q:** Pretty much. One of the more diverse things that I know of.
- A:** Ja, maybe. And we have got girls and boys. We have got men and women, you know, so... and I am glad for that, because I think an all male environment down there would have been... You know, it just brings another element into it. You know, I kind of embrace that. I think let's go with it, let's deal with it. Because that is what life is about. But no, I don't have a strict plan on it.
- Q:** What do you foresee will be the big challenges of Antarctica?
- A:** The big challenges will be: Foremost in my mind confinement, stuck in the Antarctica first. Secondly, stuck in the base through Winter, without being able to get out. And the darkness. I think those are my big concerns and challenges. And then we are moving to the challenges of getting the job done. And I suppose the psychological aspect of being able to keep focused and keep your work going in that environment. That is the big challenge for me. When that ship leaves in February and we are on our own, and that is a long time. Ja, that is quite daunting. So kind of a big challenge. Obviously other challenges for me would be, holding the team together, you know, this is naturally a bunch of young energetic people. they want to... They are not going to the Antarctic to play tiddlywinks, they want to explore, they want to be part of it all. There is a lot of people who want to be out in the nature. At the same time the DEAT have got protocols and rules and... If I am too strict and I don't let them have some fun, they are going to become psychologically incapable of doing things. So I am going to have to really balance that one in between protocol and official requirements, and just making sure that everybody is able to enjoy themselves, within the limits of safety.
- Q:** This team leader manual. Do you think that manual changed after the recent episode? Could you see changes in the manual?
- A:** Look, I didn't see the manual beforehand... Well, we got a strict form to sign, to say we may not do this, we will not do that. The Department will not take responsibility for the other... In terms of any outdoor adventure, whether it is skiing or going down a crevice or...
- Q:** Snowboarding...
- A:** ... snowboarding or any of these crazy adventures. And you know, any what they considered extreme sports, so we all signed that document. And I think, ja, the Department had to tighten up. And I understand it. It would be natural that they would. They have got to do that. And at the same time, I still stand by what I said, I've got to keep the team suitably occupied and entertained, you know. But I think as team members safety would have been my number one consideration anyway. With or without the protocol of the Department. There is now way that I would put ourselves into any situation of risk. And certainly not voluntarily on a, so called, recreational expedition. So I hardly needed the guidance of the DEAT for that in any case.
- Q:** And you have previous expedition experience, so you would know what can be risky. In terms of the main contract, do you get life insurance or medical cover from it?
- A:** No, as far as I understand we are covered for workers compensation only. That enquires that the injury happened in a working capacity. So if we are injured doing something else, we are not covered. For that, those of us who have got medical aid, have been encouraged by the Department to keep... if anything should happen outside of work, we are going to have to pay for our own medical. And that might include evacuation and a massive bill on the aeroplane.
- Q:** So did you inform them? Do you have a medical aid?
- A:** I do personally. And everybody has been informed that if they did have, they should retain it. Which is a sensible...

Q: Have you informed your medical aid?

A: Ja, my medical aid is Discovery and on previous expeditions, when I have gone away, I have told them I needed extra cover. Certain things that I have applied often for expeditionary cover. In this instance I actually requested to downgrade my cover, because I simply can't use it for fourteen months.

Q: You're not going to make any doctors visits or anything.

A: Ja, I am not going to be making doctor's visits and for six of those fourteen months I can't get there anyway, irrespective of what happens. And they have been amazing. I mean, they actually came and then they... Initially they also didn't look at the thing, where are you going. Like are you just going to ski in Europe? Then they came back and said: "Okay, this is a kind of special case". And they have agreed to downgrade me to a lower premium and will upgrade me immediately on return, without me underwriting. Which I think was quite good of Discovery. But that didn't happen talking to the standard consultants on the phone. It required a little bit of drilling down into the system. Or drilling up. To get to the right supervisory level.

Q: O, so they actually read what I am saying, you know.

A: Ja, ja. They didn't, hey. Not the normal run of the mill. Ja.

Q: You are leaving a wife behind?

A: I am leaving my wife behind and my two children, but my two children have left home now. So they are not really... It is not really so direct on them. My wife has always been incredibly supportive of any adventure. She has been there on some of them with me. Obviously not on this one. And she supported it wholeheartedly and she does. It got hard towards the end with the reality being fourteen months. But I think, I mentioned earlier, you know, that both of us have reached an age now, I am fifty-one and she is forty-six. She is just embarking on a new career in Psychology. She is quite focussed on that. So she has got a lot of work ahead of her.

Q: Has she started studying in psychology?

A: She has actually just finished studying as a counsellor with the Applied School of Psychology and... So she is now working as a Consultant/Psychologist. So she is pretty busy. And she has got her focus and I think it is entering that time in your lives is... in a relationship, where you can say: "Look, we have done the children. We have been through getting all of that up and going, you know. A lot of the house is sorted. What are we going to do next? And this kind of opened up new doors, and if you can see it, like that with a firm intention that you are going to get back together at the end of it. This is not the end of the marriage. But it is rather a growing of the marriage, in a way, to a new thing. That is the way we both see things. And so she has been amazing.

Q: It must be a stimulating experience to, at your age, to go away or experience something very new. So you don't get into that sort of middle age crisis mode.

A: Well, there is two choices, you either buy the Harley or you go to the Antarctic. So or you try to find a new wife that is, who is sort of like twenty-five. Or what do men do when they reach that age?

Q: Maybe the Antarctic. That is a good option.

A: Ja that is a good option. But that is not to say that I am not going to miss my wife, but we are not...

Ja, and I think it would be very hard at the age of thirty to leave a loved one behind for like fourteen months. I think it could be the end of the relationship. But it is probably different. I am not speaking for anyone, except for myself and Malory.

Q: Is there any of your team members, who are leaving small children behind?

A: Allan, who has just joined us, is leaving a very young child behind. And I spoke to him about that briefly. I haven't had much time to talk to him. But ja, I mean, I think that must be a big issue to leave a six-year-old behind. Tukkie, his kids are mostly a little bit younger than mine, but they are up and going. They are not that young.

Q: Sort of high school...

A: High school and University age, so no I think most of them have not got. And the rest are quite young. They don't have children yet.

Q: And we also have got a married couple in, joining in.

A: Ja, I mean, and that is interesting. We've got Kevin and Beatrice and from what I understand, two women on a trip down there could be quite hard work, because they become quite competitive,

if they are unmarried. That is what I have heard said. But one married couple. But one married woman and one unmarried woman, takes the sort of sting out of it. And ja, I think it is a challenge for Beatrice and Kevin to be down there married. I am not sure I would like to come down here married. My wife for fourteen months. But ja, they seem to do a lot of things together. They have been to the air force together, they have trained together, they have worked together. They are both in the same field, you know. And in some ways I think it is quite nice, for us as a team, to have a married couple down there.

Q: Stability factor.

A: Ja, stability...

Q: Do they have married quarters at SANAE?

A: If they don't, I think, they are going to definitely have to have it. I don't think they have married quarters. I think over changeover, they might not get their own cabins together, but certainly when we are alone on the base...

Q: Otherwise you will construct.

A: We'll construct.

Q: Make a marriage quarter.

A: Ja. Absolutely. Ja.

Q: Okay. Thank you I will talk to you again, but for now that is it. Last question just. Who is the person you work most with at DEAT?

A: At DEAT Okay, I mean I have worked a lot of persons.

Q: Who was mostly in charge of the team logistics?

A: I think Gideon, has been. I don't know who most, I mean it has been a group of... Gideon has been very involved with us. Ashley to a certain extent has been involved. And, I think, Hennie Smith has been very closely involved with us. Ja, in terms of the publicity and making sure we know where to be at what time, for a certain sort of ceremonial event. So those are the three people that I have been closely associated with.

Q: Did you get the freedom of the city after all?

A: Not that I know of. No.

Q: Okay.

A: Not the freedom of the city. When you said we would get it. How... What does that even mean?

Q: I don't know.

A: No, we did a procession up Adderley street, on a cold Winters-night. I think it was more cold where the [train] [indiscernible]... The South-Eastern came pumping through, frozen in our T-shirts. And we went to the Cathedral and we got blessed by the Bishop.

Q: How many people were at the Cathedral?

A: About half the team could make it. It was the last weekend so a lot of members had gone back to see family. But half of us made it. It was quite a lovely experience actually. We got the front rows. We went up. The Bishop blessed us. It was quite emotional. So that was quite a nice experience.

Q: Was in an inter-faith experience or was it a...

A: It wasn't really. It was more Anglican, but, ja, it was fairly, sort of an open faith service. And we... I enjoyed it. They sang hymns for us. They wished us well. It was great.

Q: Did Johan attend?

A: Johan didn't attend. I will tell you who attended. It was the doctor and myself and Ruan that was the three. And then the Chaplin was there, although he was not a part of the team. We were sadly a little bit under represented on that. But it wasn't made compulsory and a lot of people just had their own agendas and there was some people, for religious reasons did not go to the Cathedral. And you can't force them to.

Q: Do you know if, but I'll also ask him, but Johan... must have any special requirements obviously. Did he put in any special requests with you?

A: He speaks to me from time to time about what he does and doesn't want to do. He won't attend birthday celebrations. Gerhard's birthday was on, two nights ago we had a birthday cake and a happy birthday. Johan excused himself from that... Because I think that is Jehovah witness protocol.

Q: And no blood transfusions either.

- A:** And then... He won't be on for blood transfusions at all, so he takes that... He excuses himself from that. He asked me if he could be excused from the 70 degree South polar dunking, whatever we call it. And ja, so I said to him: "Yes". That is his choice if he doesn't want to be involved, so be it. So those are the three main things he has excused himself from. I think they will come one at a time. He hasn't given me a list of things. And then the Cathedral, I think the reason he didn't come is because it doesn't tie in with his religious standing, as far as Jehovah's witness. But for me that is also the challenge, I mean, we tend to see the Jehovah's witnesses as somebody who knocks on the front door. No hell, to go and spend a year with somebody, wow, that is longer than, you know, closing the front door. So I think it is an opportunity to learn, what is it that makes them tick and...
- Q:** And... I mean, he also comes for a bit of an experience, having been on Gough, having been on Marion. Do you think that will help the team in some way?
- A:** I think it has already helped to a certain degree. He certainly got knowledge of what the expectations were to be, on things that people couldn't answer. Like: "What do we want on the Agulhas?", "What will life be like in three weeks?" He has been there. He hasn't been to SANAE, so he can't help us there. But he has had the confinement. So ja, he has been helpful, already, to that side of the of it .. It is good to have that experience.
- Q:** And he is the only experienced... The only guy who has experienced from Marion of Gough?
- A:** Yes, he is the only guy who has been involved in any form of involvement with the SANAP program. And has been away for a period of time. So we can draw on him.
- Q:** Is he Deputy Team Leader?
- A:** He is Deputy Team Leader as well. He is, ja, he is our deputy.
- Q:** Thank you.
- A:** Pleasure.