

## Martin Saunders: Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

Martin Saunders

**Name of interviewer:**

Peter Bassett

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Bristol, United Kingdom

**Length of interview:**

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### 1. The early years

*Int: My name is Peter Bassett and I'm today interviewing Martin Saunders, probably one of the most experienced and widely travelled wildlife cameraman ever. We're at the ARKive Theatre at Wildscreen in Bristol and today's the 10<sup>th</sup> of October. Right, Martin, can you just introduce yourself and say a little bit about how you got started? Where you were born and things like that.*

MS: Well, my name's Martin Saunders. I'm now a wildlife film cameraman but I used to be a cameraman in the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) film unit until it was disbanded in 1992, and I'm now working freelance.

*Int: Right, and going right the way back, Martin, to where you were born. What really inspired you to perhaps be a cameraman or a wildlife cameraman? I don't know, what was first? Did you have a passion for wildlife or a passion for camera work?*

MS: Camera work I think first. I was living in Plymouth and I remember developing an interest in film, both on the camera side and the projection side. So I bought a projector, well my folks bought a projector, and subsequently and I used to show silent films to the kids in the area. And subsequently I thought I'd better get a camera. So I sold my canoe that I had at the time and I bought what was then a 9.5mm camera.



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*Int: Can you remember what make it was?*

MS: I can't remember what make it was but it had **sprocket** holes down the centre of the film which was highly undesirable at most times, and most of the film you showed had a big stripe down the centre where the **sprockets** were dragged. So anyway, so I developed that interest and I made a couple of little films on various things. And that's —.

*Int: Can you remember what you did, the first one?*

MS: Well, I just did some photography around Plymouth really. But then I thought moving things would be a bit better and so I started developing an interest in moving things, i.e., animals, and I did little bits of stuff like that.

*Int: Can you remember the first animal or bird? Was it like a seagull?*

MS: I think it was a cat.

*Int: Not moving too quickly then?*

MS: Not moving too quickly. I think it was purring at the time. And so then I went to Plymouth Technical College it was then, it's now a university, and I studied radio engineering because I had an interest in broadcasting and I wanted to get into broadcasting. So having done this course I actually went up to the doors of the BBC in Plymouth, knocked on the doors sort of thing and I asked can I have a job. And I was interviewed by the engineer in charge down in Plymouth at the time and he filled in an application form. Well the application form he filled in asked you which department in the BBC you wanted to join and because of my background he put Transmitting Department.

So when I joined the BBC I was in Transmitting Department and I found myself up a mountain in the Lake District transmitting the World Service. I always think it's like Epsom Salts, I went through the BBC from transmitting the World Service to making it.

*Int: So how old were you when you actually turned up on the doorstep?*

MS: I was 19 when I joined the BBC

*Int: Right.*

MS: And I realised immediately I was in the wrong department, and I wanted to be in film. And I have to say that Transmitting Department is as far away from television studios and film making as England is from Australia, and there were no direct flights either. You had to work your way and I worked my way through the BBC through being an engineer in London, in Planning and Installation Department. I installed the first



transistorised sound desk in TC1 [Television Centre Studio 1], the biggest studio in the Television Centre, and eventually worked in the studios on the maintenance and what we call the rack side, which is the people that control the pictures during transmission, and went to Plymouth.

In Plymouth it was what they call an integrated station and everybody on the station did practically everything. So there was tremendous background because I did studio cameras, I did studio managing, I did **telecine**, I did film processing; I did recording and editing, sound recording and editing, control room.

*Int: What a background knowledge and you were still keeping the camera work going in your own personal time were you?*

MS: Oh yes, but you know, only on an amateur basis at that time. And I mean in the control room we were the only people in there after a certain time in the evening, so we then had to answer the public because when the public called the BBC they spoke to us which was pretty impressive. And in the morning, the Third Programme as it was called then, Radio 3, we had to start up the transmitter when we went in there in the morning, so we ran the transmitter up.

*Int: Is this all radio then, was it?*

MS: This was radio and television in as much as it was the local 6 o'clock **opt out** programme, the local regional news and stuff which was, I think, then called Spotlight South West (1) and I think it still is called Spotlight South West (1). I think it went to a different name and then reverted. And while I was down there a job was advertised as a trainee assistant film cameraman in Cardiff and I applied for it. And I was told then, and this must have been about, I don't know, 1967 something like that, and I was told by everybody down there what are you doing, applying for a job in film, film's finished, it's videotape. Videotape is the thing of the future so it's a waste of time going in the film unit. But anyway I applied for this job and duly went off and had an interview in Cardiff, and then I was short-listed for an interview in London. And I remember the film unit manager in Cardiff.

*Int: Do you remember who that was?*

MS: Who it was? His name was John Lanchester and he was an engineer in Plymouth, and in Plymouth I used to do sound outside broadcasts. I did Jazz Club (2) and Any Questions (3) and racing from Buckfastleigh (4), and all that stuff. I went on this board in London. I remember it very clearly because during the board I cracked a joke, and John Lanchester was a very big chap who stammered, and I cracked this joke and he was rocking back on his chair on the two legs. He laughed at this joke and I saw he was flapping around like a big penguin and I thought, my God, if he comes this way I've got a chance. If he comes backwards and goes on the floor there's no way I'm going to get this job.

So fortunately he came back and there were an enormous number of applicants for this post and I thought, well, why me, why did I get it? And I realised that actually John Lanchester, being an engineer in Plymouth, he did exactly the job that I was doing in Plymouth when I applied for the film unit job. And so I suppose he thought if he could do that job he'd probably do this job. So that's how I got in film unit initially.

*Int: I bet you can still remember the same joke, can't you? [MS shakes his head indicating no]. No, you*

*can't. So how old were you then when you got that job?*

MS: I think I was about 27.

*Int: Right, and that was a trainee assistant film cameraman, typical BBC naming system isn't it?*

MS: Yes, a trainee assistant film cameraman. But in the BBC jobs were usually given to people one step up. So after a short training course in Ealing and various odd little courses and things, I was still a trainee but I was working as an assistant film cameraman. And in Cardiff, being a national region as opposed to an English region, it did every type of film imaginable. I mean you could be working on news or dramas or schools, religious programmes, anything, because the film unit covered the cross section of broadcasting, and that was tremendous training.

Well being in Cardiff, which is very close to Bristol, this gave me the opportunity, knowing that the Natural History Unit was in Bristol, this gave me the opportunity of trying to work when they needed somebody extra. And so I used to go across to Bristol now and again when I was asked for to do assistant cameraman jobs in Bristol.

*Int: And that would have been on regional programmes or it could have been wildlife?*

MS: No, usually that was for the film unit and the film unit in Bristol was mainly involved in natural history but it did do other things. There was a general features unit which did documentaries and dramas. So I could of worked on anything when they wanted somebody extra because of the proximity of Cardiff, they brought somebody from Cardiff in.

*Int: So when you wanted to go over to work for the Natural History Unit there must have been some programmes that inspired you then, as you were working in Cardiff on other programmes? Who was on the telly at that point?*

MS: I remember really the first natural history programme that impressed me was David Attenborough's Zoo Quest (5).

*Int: Right.*

And it was extraordinary because I remember clearly in Zoo Quest (6) David going to Komodo to film the famous Komodo dragon and, of course, I was still at school. Little did I know that several years later I'd go back to Komodo with David to film the Komodo dragon in colour for The Living Planet (7) which was quite extraordinary.

But the only programmes that were regularly made in Bristol, I think, at the time were World About Us (8) programmes because there was no major series made at the time. World About Us (8) itself was a sort of major series but each programme was an individual subject, not an actual series.

*Int: So can you remember perhaps the first projects you were working on, a wildlife programme?*

MS: I can because when a job came up in Bristol and I applied for it, and because of my association with Bristol I got the job as an assistant cameraman. Well, once again, as an assistant cameraman in the BBC, working one step above you, I realised that I wasn't going to be very much an assistant cameraman. In fact, I hardly did any assistant cameraman jobs in Bristol. I did jobs as an acting film cameraman and the very first job I did, I remember I joined Bristol in 1973 and I was promptly sent away on three different jobs in rapid succession. The first one the BBC had been sent some material from a sort of scientist in Taiwan.

*Int: Right.*

MS: He'd sent some film he'd done of insects, remarkable shots, close-ups of all sorts of exotic, very colourful insects and the BBC wanted to use this but there was no way they could put it into a programme. So myself and the producer and a sound recordist went across to make a programme around this scientist in Taiwan, so that every now and again you could incorporate the footage that he did of the insects into this programme. It was for the World About Us (8) and it was called The Insect World of Doctor Lee (9).

I was a diver at the time, well I still am. Diving was my hobby and I had been in Plymouth originally, I actually was a founder member of the British Sub Aqua Club Plymouth and so I'd been diving for quite a long time. And the BBC found out about this and I got promptly sent off to do some underwater filming for another World About Us (8) which was in the Indian Ocean, called An Island Called Danger (10) which was pretty impressive I thought.

So I did that and then I went to India to work on a programme called 'What Use is Wildlife?' (11) and I was sent by myself. That was in a way one of the first one-man jobs. I went out there with a cameraman as the assistant but at some point we split up, and I went to Khana to film tigers for two programmes actually. One was What Use is Wildlife (11) and there was a sequence about the way they were moving villagers out of an area to create a national park. The other was The Flying Prince of Wildlife (12) which was Bernhard of the Netherlands, Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, and he'd been there to see tigers and he hadn't filmed any tigers. So I was sent there to film tigers from the back of an elephant as though Prince Bernhard had filmed them, and then I went back to Bristol. That was the first jobs I ever did in the film unit in Bristol.

*Int: You must have thought, gosh, I've arrived. Can you remember who the Head of Film Unit was then when you were being interviewed?*

MS: I can, Cyril Moorhead.

*Int: Cyril Moorhead, and on the panel would have been the head of the unit as well, would it? Who would it have been? Who at that point? Desmond Hawkins was it?*

MS: No, it was after that. I'm not sure, I can't remember to be honest.

*Int: Effectively you came over. You left Cardiff, came over here to live and work. So the equipment then would have all been supplied by the BBC. What would have been a standard kit when you're going out for*

*the Secret Life of Doctor Lee (9)? What would you have been taken on your trips then?*

MS: Well, the first thing is that the film unit at that time usually went out with what was called a full crew, and a full crew was a cameraman, an assistant cameraman, a sound recordist and a lighting engineer. And each of these people had their own equipment provided by the BBC. If you went out with any less personnel it was a very difficult thing because the place was quite union orientated at the time, and they didn't want to lose jobs. So the prospect of reducing the crew was always a hurdle difficult to get over. My kit was a camera, which at the time was an **Arriflex BL** which stands for 'blimp' because it was soundproofed, it didn't make a noise outside. And obviously the **magazines** and the lenses.

*Int: So did you have a **macro lens** then to go and do those things, or what were you —.*

MS: We didn't have a **macro lens**. What we did was put magnifiers on the front of the camera which were called **diopters**, and you had times 1, 2, and 3 **diopters** to enable you to focus very close.

*Int: Right. But presumably other cameramen in the BBC wouldn't have had that, that was new equipment? They wouldn't normally need that type of system?*

MS: No, probably not, in other departments. I mean the thing about working in the BBC in the wildlife section was that you really had to do things as naturally as possible in the wild, and do things as closely as possible in the wild. But some things could not be done in the wild, very close shots of ants and things like that. So you had to actually get the sort of shots that would lead into the very tight photography that was done perhaps in a studio. So you were trying to make the whole programme flow.

*Int: So were you doing both on location?*

MS: Yes.

*Int: So you were setting up your own little **macro** set-ups?*

MS: Absolutely. Well, in terms if you see leaf ants crawling on a branch you go as close as possible. What is, I think, incredibly important in wildlife filming, in all filming actually, which the background of being in Cardiff and working in dramas and everything else, you didn't shoot shots, you shot sequences. Because it was very important to get material that the editor could cut together without having similar shots cut together, which would look very awkward on the screen. So that training was very good.

*Int: So the kit then obviously, compared today, was quite, well, basic I suppose but at the same time it did the job. What were the problems when you were going out on the those first trips because you didn't have sensitive films, you didn't have very, very fast lenses I presume? So what were your main obstacles you had to overcome when you filming a sequence?*

MS: We used long lenses, of course, we did have long lenses at the time, telephoto lenses, 300 and 600 mm lenses. One of the big problems was actually the camera, because the **Arriflex BL** was, as I say, **blimp** and

soundproofed. In order to achieve this, the mechanical part of the camera was mounted on rubber inside a heavy metal outside. The lens was attached to obviously the camera bit inside and when you filmed, because it was a very tight shot and because the thing was rubber mounted, usually in the viewfinder it was vibrating. What was difficult was to figure out whether that vibration was due to the camera or whether it was actually going to be on the film. And so you really had to be very careful about this, and that was one of the big problems film-wise.

The other problems about this, obviously, are the travel involved and the security but the film also. In those days we used a **tungsten balanced film** which is film balanced for indoor lights like this. And in order to film outside you had to put a filter on the front which converted the film to look at daylight, as though it were daylight normally.

*Int: Was that the Wratten 85B?*

MS: The infamous 85, that's right.

*Int: Because you were taking that kit out, I presume it was just, what, five or six boxes at that point?*

MS: Well, there'd be the camera box and then there'd be another box with spare **magazines** and batteries in it, and then there'd be a box of maybe odd little accessories. You'd have a tripod of course, and then you'd have your own case maybe. So maybe five boxes, yes, and plus the film. The number of the boxes dependent on how much film you took of course.

*Int: Yes. I presume —. First of all, who were the producers that you were working with on those first World About Us programmes (8)?*

MS: The producer on The Insect World of Doctor Lee (9) was Ned Kelly who became a producer of The Living Planet series (13). The producer on An Island called Danger (10) was Peter Crawford and the other two programmes, 'What Use is Wildlife?' (11) presented by Julian Pettifer and the Prince Bernhard film (12), was Richard Brock who was a producer on the Life on Earth series (14) and an executive producer on The Living Planet (13) series.

*Int: And they all became senior producers and were here for over 20 years. Why I've mentioned the number of boxes is that in your kind of travels you have had some massive, massive equipment haven't you? Give an idea of what you might travel on an extreme overseas trip?*

MS: Well nowadays I should say that the film unit in the BBC was an incredible organisation actually and there was no such thing as a specialist wildlife cameraman in the film unit. And

you were expected to do any job that the film unit gave you. I mean in Bristol we had, when you weren't doing anything you were given another job. I remember, for instance, during The Living Planet series (13) I had a couple of months where I didn't have anything to do and I was put on a Wicker's World (15) on the QE2 [Queen Elizabeth 2], trundling around the Pacific.

*Int: How amazing.*

MS: So you really had to be able to adapt. I mean I could come back off a wildlife assignment on Friday and be given a drama on the Monday. I mean it was incredible and I think it's that training which is lost these days actually because you can't have that sort of thing these days. I have to say that when in 1992 they closed the film unit and I became a freelance, when you become freelance you're forced into some sort of specialisation because nobody's going to get a drama cameraman to go into the Arctic to film a polar bear. And nobody's going to get a wildlife cameraman to do a drama. So you're forced into specialising in an area.

Having said that, you say that you filmed David Attenborough and you're immediately recognised as a specialist cameraman. But, in fact, filming Attenborough is more like a drama documentary than wildlife filming. The only behaviour is anything you can get from David really, you know.

In the film unit, and this is leading up to your question about the number of the boxes, I haven't forgotten it.

*Int: No that's alright, carry on!*

MS: In the film unit, as I said, it was quite a rigid organisation and to get a reduced crewing was quite a business. During the Life on Earth series (14) I thought to myself that there are people inside the film unit that can do specialist wildlife jobs, which at the time were always given to freelance specialist cameramen, and I thought and I wanted to do specialist wildlife work, so I went to the Life on Earth (14) producer and said, look, I think if you give me a chance I could do this job by myself.

*Int: Was that with John [Sparks] or Chris [Parsons] then?*

MS: That was with John, John Sparks. So he said, well, if you think you can and he had no confidence whatsoever that this could be done, I have to say. But he said, okay, I'll give you a chance, and I was sent to Venezuela to film howler monkeys for Life on Earth (14).

*Int: Straight-forward start then!*

MS: Straight-forward start, nothing too complicated! I got on this plane and went to Lisbon and waited overnight to get a plan to Caracas. In the meantime, in order to save a bit of money, the BBC had sent my gear via cargo instead of letting me take it as excess baggage, that resulted - and I had 10 days to do this job- that resulted in me taking three days to get the equipment out of the cargo sheds in Caracas Airport. So three days went down the tube for a start. Then there was two days' journey to the ranch on the plains of Venezuela, Thomas Blonn, who had a wildlife ranch down there. And it took a day to get there and a day to get back, so my filming time was cut in half before I even started. I thought here I am trying to do a good one-man job, the first one really that had been totally approved in a way, and all of a sudden I've lost half of my filming time.

*Int: Did you have detailed notes from researchers or anything like that, or were you just told to turn up and meet up with the owner?*



MS: On one-man assignments as a wildlife cameraman you really can't be expected to know everything about everything, and there are specific points in films that you are asked to illustrate. So you do get a brief when you go out from the producer as to exactly what is needed. Of course, if you see something quite spectacular you film it but in the main you are there to illustrate certain points.

In fact John [Sparks] was, I suppose, so convinced that I wasn't going to do this job that he sent me down there by myself without a sound recordist, and I filmed howler monkeys silently. So there are these howler monkeys on the screen, doing things and all the rest of it, making all this noise, no sound. So then he had to send a sound recordist to Thomas Blonn's ranch, so that became a sound recordist's one-man job because the cameraman wasn't required. So a sound recordist went down there to get howler monkeys howling to go with my footage of howler monkeys.

*Int: So you did succeed in that limited amount of time?*

MS: I did succeed. I did succeed. And —.

*Int: Did you ever get any feedback from David Attenborough?*

MS: I did and I'm always grateful for this because I went from Venezuela to meet the producer, John Sparks in - where was it —. I went from Caracas to meet John Sparks in the Caribbean and we were filming rhinoceros iguanas or something. And he said how did you get on with the howler monkeys, and I said that you know - he threw a fit because he thought I should have taken the equipment myself and not have all this happening and I was sort of making excuses and if anything had gone wrong and all that because I was obviously quite worried about it.

I went from there to Florida and I went into a hotel in Florida and the receptionist handed me a telegram and it was from David Attenborough.

*Int: Great.*

MS: He said, 'Martin, the howler monkeys were fantastic, thank you, David', and I thought that was brilliant because you know, I was really quite concerned. What was concerning me even more was that at the time I was not the film cameraman —.

*Int: You were still assistant then.*

MS: I was still an assistant. Therefore, if you messed up a job the suspicion was that they'd say, "oh well you know, that's because he's an assistant so he's no good", and then you'd never get a cameraman's job.

## **2. Pioneering the one-man camera team**

*Int: So there's a lot of pressure on you then and also, just leading onto that now, what you were pioneering there was a new way of working for a cameraman in the BBC. And obviously, with the BBC being more unionised then, you were going to have even more pressure put on you I presume from the people around you, as the single working came over. What actually was it like for you then because it couldn't have been easy actually? I'm sure it wouldn't have been.*

MS: It wasn't easy at the time to get this one-man working situation and in a way it split the film unit right down the middle. Because there were members of the film unit that supported this idea and members that didn't support this idea. And the ones that didn't support it had the attitude that by doing this job myself I was taking away the job of an assistant. But the assistant would never have gone on these sort of jobs because they would have been given to a freelancer. So in a way, but what was needed in Bristol at the time when I was away there was still the requirement for an assistant and therefore, they had to employ when required an assistant on a freelance basis. So in a way I was bringing work into the unit as opposed to being accused of taking jobs away from the film unit, you know. And that went on for many years, I have to say, and it was a traumatic time. I mean I was praised by half the unit and sent to Coventry by the other half. You know, it was very difficult.

*Int: But on the location just isn't the space in a hide, you don't need an assistant. That was the simple argument really.*

MS: You don't only not need one, you don't want one because they're a distraction and because there's somebody else in the hide, which is usually very small anyway, is not directly involved with the filming, what's he going to do? He's going to sit there and do nothing and get totally bored and fidget, you know, and that's all to the detriment of the job. But with that situation the equipment that you took with you was dependent on the actual job. And I mean I did jobs on a one-man basis which involved three or four cases but sometimes, eventually I took some lights, battery lights usually - I got approval to take a battery light, I could never take main lights but it was creeping in - and I was also doing underwater filming. Well, sometimes I went away with about 15 cases and the underwater housing which is quite heavy.

*Int: But that's a couple of trolleys, putting through security.*

MS: Yes, it was a pain and underwater equipment is heavy, you know. But then again you don't need an assistant to go underwater. What you need to go underwater is an experienced buddy diver as they're called, a partner diver to be on the safe side. And —.

*Int: There was no formal safety form or anything like that I presume?*

MS: No. You just got on with whatever you had to get on with really. I remember being in the Arctic filming underwater —.

*Int: You always picked the easy jobs, didn't you?*

MS: Yes, I always given the easy jobs. And I was filming underwater on a semi-frozen lake and the ice had obviously melted, and it created a layer of freshwater which was floating on saltwater. I dived down and the freshwater that got trapped in the **demand valve**, because the freezing point of the saltwater was lower it promptly froze and the **demand valve** froze open. I had a diver with me and I could feel this happening because I could feel something going wrong, and I tapped him on the shoulder and I handed him the camera. And at that point the **demand valve** exploded in bubbles, trying to pump air into me. Well, I obviously took it out and I surfaced, and I came to the top and I thought, well, what I've done is I've made the mistake of doing this job without a rubber winterising cap which was supposed to contain alcohol which would prevent it freezing.

I was in a diving camp and I said has anybody got any alcohol that I could put into this diving cap and nobody had any alcohol. And I thought what am I going to do about this? Well, we'd come from Newfoundland I'd bought a bottle of Newfoundland rum called Screech and I thought, I wonder if this is going to do the job? So I filled the rubber cap up with Newfoundland Screech and clipped on to the **demand valve** and went diving, and it worked. We got back to Bristol and we were unpacking the gear, and I was unpacking my diving gear and I thought I know what's in that rubber cap. So I took the rubber cap off and the chap that I was with in the Arctic and myself, I said we'll toast the Arctic, so we had a swig each of this Newfoundland Sub Arctic Screech.

*Int: Was the film still in focus? Amazing. Obviously you were pioneering this single working and at that point you were still an assistant.*

MS: I was still an assistant. I never became a cameraman.

*Int: So when actually did you become a full cameraman in the eyes of the BBC?*

MS: In the eyes of the BBC?

*Int: Yes.*

MS: Well, I think I have the Life on Earth series (14) to thank for that actually because I did the whole of the Life on Earth (14) as an assistant cameraman, with extra responsibility reward which I think amounted to something like 60 pence a day, I think I was getting for this.

*Int: Very generous.*

MS: Well, you know the BBC's like that. And at the end of the Life on Earth (14) a cameraman's job became available due to the unfortunate death of one of the established cameraman in Bristol. And I was working in Florida and I thought – well I obviously applied for the job - and I thought, well, at some point I'm going to have go back for this interview. Well, to my surprise and horror actually, I found a telegram in the hotel again waiting for me which said we've decided to consider you in your absence. I thought, oh dear, oh dear, this is terrible because when you got a memo like that in the BBC it meant that there's no way you're going to get the job, and to my absolute amazement I got the job. I think I owe it all to the Life on Earth (14) really, sequences like the gorillas and the lions.

*Int: So would have been making that decision? Would that have been the head of the unit, what Chris Parsons and Mick Rhodes?*

MS: Yes, Mick Rhodes. Chris Parsons was the executive producer of the Life on Earth (14) he would have had a lot of input into it of course. The administration in Bristol, they could hardly say after the Life on Earth series (14) that I was inefficient and I was doing a rotten job. That obviously helped and the film unit manager, of course.

*Int: So how many cameramen were there at the BBC then? It'd been yourself and Maurice Fisher presumably.*

MS: Yes, there were three, actually. There were three cameramen and two assistants which were always acting, myself and a chap called Hugh Maynard. And the other cameramen were Jim Saunders, Bernard Hedges and Maurice Fisher. But in effect, although the establishment was only for three there were in fact five.

*Int: Maurice was doing a lot of the sync (synchronisation) during the Life on Earth (14) wasn't he? Mostly the sync team.*

MS: Yes.

### **3. Filming for the Trials of Life and the famous gorilla sequence with David Attenborough**

*Int: And yourself primarily going around the world. I saw some of the itineraries you had that Chris [Parsons] put into his book, absolutely amazing. I'm just thinking what would be really worthwhile actually would be to chat about one, say, filming trip, and maybe focus on the gorillas, obviously it is one of the most famous wildlife clips of all time. And also give yourself a chance to tell the full, complete story. But it would be lovely to kind of say what happened on the whole trip, if that's all right, because I don't think many people realise what a trip entails at that point. Because they don't think about going through customs, they don't think about the excess baggage. What for you —. That trip would have been three weeks, I presume, something like that maybe?*

MS: Well, before the gorillas —. One trip I remember —. I mean David Attenborough will always say that the cameramen have the best time because he only goes to places when he has to appear in front of the camera. Whereas a cameraman has to be there to get animal behaviour which David would dearly like to see, and one very incredible instance of this I remember I was working in a southern state of Florida in the United States and Maurice [Fisher] was working somewhere up north. And when you film these wildlife programmes you rely an awful lot of scientists, researchers and students to make sure that you don't waste money by waiting around for a month for something which somebody knows is not going to happen for three weeks. And so hopefully you get there at the economical time to film what you want to film, without waiting around and wasting money.

And on this trip I was working in the south and Maurice was working in the north, and in the south we'd set up something and David, with the sound recordist who was Dickie Bird. Lyndon Bird is his real name but Dickie we obviously call him.



*Int: Yep.*

MS: They flew in and we do the piece with David, and David and Dickie would get on a plane and fly off, by which time Maurice would have set something up in the north, and they'd do a job up there. By which time I'd set something back up in Florida, so they'd come back down to Florida. And they spent, I don't know about a month I think, going backward and forward like a yo-yo. Well, that's amazing really.

But then eventually we went on this trip which turned out to be quite amazing, to film gorillas in Rwanda and chimpanzees in Tanzania. And we arrived in Rwanda and we got all the permits and all the rest of it and we got this truck, went to the bottom of the mountain and then we climbed up the mountain and met Dian Fossey. Which was an amazing experience actually to meet this woman who we'd heard about and who'd been working there for all this time. And she — I remember she was very concerned about the fact there were four of us. There was David, there was Dickie the sound recordist, John and myself. She was worried about four of us going to be with these gorillas because of disturbance and doing harm for the work she'd done.

And we spent all that evening talking her into this and eventually, cos we said David has to be there, I mean we all had to be there for the individual reasons. There was no way that we could have done the job with anybody less and we were already cut down to the absolute minimum really. Anyway, so what you do with gorillas if somebody finds out where they slept the night before and then in the morning you go out to where they were, by which time they've moved off but they've bulldozed these trails through the vegetation. So you follow these trails until you find them.

And I remember the porters, the African porters, were carrying the equipment until we got within a reasonable distance of the gorillas, and then we'd have to carry our own equipment because Dian would not allow these people to go near the gorillas. The reason for it was that they were black, so were the poachers. And she did not want the gorillas to be habituated to these people because they might allow a poacher to easily kill them. And it was already a problem because when we were there a gorilla that she'd worked with for many years, called Digit, had been poached.

And anyway we went out and we were filming the gorillas. I remember because of this filter, this flat filter that I had on the front of the camera that led me into a problem. Because the gorillas are very curious and they come up to you, and nowadays they try desperately to keep people at a distance from the gorillas for fear of transferring infection. But it is actually very difficult because it's not that you go to them, it's they come to you. I remember this big adult male, not a silverback but an adult, came up to me and he saw his reflection in the flat filter in front of the camera and, of course, he thought it was another gorilla. So I suddenly felt this big hand around the back of my neck and he started to sort of wrestle me, you know like they play, not aggressively. But I was like this with the camera and everything and I tried to be cool about it but it was a bit difficult with a gorilla with his hand wrapped round your neck, isn't it?

And I couldn't take any pictures, because this chap had his face right in front of the camera. So in order to get pictures I had to move the camera away. Like if I wanted to take a picture in that direction [moves to left], I'd pointed the camera over in that direction by which time he'd trundled round and stuck his face here [moves to right]. Then I went back round the camera and took the picture before he came back and stuck his head in the front again. This was amazing really.

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And then, of course, they came up to David [Attenborough] and started interacting with David. Well I mean this was quite incredible but I was actually told not to film it. And the reason I was told not to film it was because we'd gone there to film this opposable thumb business, and I was told at the time that this looked too much like an Animal Magic (16) sequence, with somebody like Johnny Morris rolling round with something in a zoo. Well, I think what was forgotten was that we were actually there in the wild, in the rainforest of Rwanda, with a wild family of gorillas, and there they were rolling around with David. I said "I've really got to film this" and he said, "oh right, run 100 feet on it" which is about 2 and a half minutes.

So I filmed everything I could but because of that the initial encounter was missed. The initial encounter when David was approached by this gorilla was unfortunately missed. But —.

*Int: So the actual sync piece that David did actually isn't about opposable thumbs, is it? He was just reacting.*

MS: He was.

*Int: He hadn't rehearsed or anything like that.*

MS: Well, no, David never rehearses. It's like what I was saying about being a wildlife cameraman. If you work with somebody like David, what David does is he goes somewhere and he has obviously an idea of what he's going to say but he will absorb the atmosphere. With the gorillas it was different because you had to really just get in there and do it. But he would absorb atmosphere and then he'd come up to you and he'd say, "Well, I'm going to say this —." Then he'd just go away a bit and think about it and get everything right. In the meantime, in this short period of time, you had to figure out how you were going to film this, in order to illustrate the points that he was going to say. So this was always a challenge with David because of his immediate —. When he'd finished rehearsing he'd like to get on with it. Spontaneous is the word I'm looking for.

*Int: But due to all your background in Cardiff and what have you, and the sequence building philosophy you had, you were able to make the most of that 150 feet?*

MS: Yes, absolutely.

*Int: What did you go for first? Do you go for the master shot with David and then quickly go for the cuttings? How did you structure or it depended on what happened at the time?*

MS: That depended upon what happened at the time. For instance, with the gorillas, when you were with the gorillas you'd go for some close shots. When you were approaching the gorillas you'd do some wide shots. The thing with wildlife filming is that you never know what's going to happen next. You could be approaching an animal and all of sudden it panics and it's gone, and you might never see it again. So there's this theory about taking a shot and then cutting the distance down by half and taking another shot, and cutting the distance down by half and taking another shot. So at least by the time you get in to get the real close-ups at least you've got a sequence.





*Int: Yeh. Why I say is that the cameramen don't have the same problem as you did then. Film stock was one of the most expensive parts of the process and you had to be incredibly precise with what —. When I first joined it was the main focus of attention, and the criticism was getting those sequences for the least amount of film. So you couldn't just shoot, you had to have that philosophy.*

MS: Well, that's right, and bear in mind that you had a **magazine** of film which was 10 minutes long and you would take, for instance, a maximum of three **magazines** of film with you. If you went out with full **magazines** once you'd finished those **magazines**, which was 30 minutes, it wasn't just a case of clipping another one or something. You had to actually go into a black changing bag and change the film in the dark and all that took time. And so you had to be really careful about not running out of film at crucial moments.

*Int: And also I presume in those situations you were not quite sure of the lighting conditions, and unlike having your **ISO button** on a digital camera, you had to have fast stop or slow stop. How do you —. You think, right, I've got three **magazines**, do I put two slow film, one fast? Do you just —.*

MS: Well, it's difficult. In the gorillas, for instance I mean the film stock now, we're talking about 1979 and the film stop now has improved enormously. But then you were in a rainforest, 10,000 feet up in a mountain tangled up with prickly thistles and stinging nettles and patches of bright sunlight in dark areas and black gorillas. Then you think this is a problem.

*Int: A challenge.*

MS: A challenge. But fortunately it worked. I remember what was tremendous for me actually, I had three full **magazines** of film. After we —. I crept off by myself in order to get some close-ups. So I left the others behind and I found myself in this clearing, and I was in this clearing and this little pot-bellied young gorilla comes trundling up and starts rolling out on my feet and all the rest of it. And intrigued by the battery lead, tries to pull the battery out and all the rest of it, and I'm being very delicate about this and trying to stop him wrecking the camera. And eventually his older brothers and sisters, mothers, uncles and all the rest of it arrive to make sure that little Charlie was all right, you know. I found myself in this clearing surrounded by about 15 gorillas.

*Int: How amazing.*

MS: Some of which were right up by me and playing with the camera and all sorts you know. And the silverback walks in and walks by as close as we are here and I thought blimey. This huge thing walks by and sits down at a respectable distance to keep an eye on everything. I shot all three **magazines** of film very gently and I got most of the close-ups that were used in the sequence of the hands and all the rest of it. I got practically all of the close-ups on that one experience with three **magazines**, 30 minutes of film.

*Int: And was that after the sync piece? So you went out again afterwards, did you?*

MS: No actually —. Yes, that was after the sync piece. Well, there were several sync pieces but the bit with David rolling around with the gorillas, I'm not sure whether that was before or after. I'm not sure actually.

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*Int: But all of it was contained within three **magazines**?*

MS: No, just when I was in the clearing.

*Int: Oh just the close-ups when you went off by yourself.*

MS: No, we shot a lot more than that on the whole thing. We shot about, I don't know, 15 rolls or something, which was 15 **magazines**. But when I in this clearing ran out of film I didn't do anything. I sort of sat there and I actually just enjoyed the experience. And eventually the gorillas get bored and they move away. I remember that this was on the very first day when Dian [Fossey] came out with us. And as the last gorilla moved off into the undergrowth I sort of looked around and I saw Dian peering at me through the vegetation, and I thought, "oh blimey, what is she going to say." When I saw her she came up to me and she said you've got no problems with gorillas, I'm not going to bother to come out tomorrow.

*Int: Really?*

MS: Yeh. Which is a fantastic complement, you know. I think it was primarily because when I'd run out of film I hadn't gone into a panic about reloading some more. I'd accepted that that was the end of what I could do at a time, and I'd also accepted that I wasn't going to move away from the gorillas, I would let them move away from me. She didn't come out after that because at the time she was quite ill in fact. She had some sort of pneumonia and she came out that first day which was quite an effort, I think, for her to make sure nothing untoward was going to happen.

*Int: Yes, but what a complement for you.*

MS: Tremendous complement. I was really really —. I really felt good about that.

*Int: So actually as a team you were on an absolute high but actually having the film wasn't the end of the story, was it?*

MS: It was not the end of the story by any means, my word. As I said, Digit the gorilla that Dian had been working with for I think about 11 years before we got there, had been killed only just prior to us being there. When we arrived in Kigali Airport, I remember seeing a poster on the wall of Digit with his hand in a beckoning gesture, and underneath it read 'come and see me in Rwanda'. Well, the fact is that he was dead so nobody could go and see him in Rwanda anyway. And unknown to us, we had got involved somehow in some infight between the government parks department and Dian and all that, about the way that Rwanda wasn't looking after its natural resources and I think they thought we were doing a thing about the gorillas being poached and Digit's death, and all the rest of it, which couldn't have been further from the truth.

So we duly left having done the filming, came down the mountain, got into the truck that met us at the bottom of the mountain. We were trundling off down the road and I was sitting in the front with the driver, it's a French speaking thing, and the other three were on the back. We rounded the corner and there were some khaki clad individuals there with rifles, trying to block us. The driver said "bandits" and put his foot down and charged right through this lot, who promptly starting shooting at us with the rifles. And these bullets were





winging over our heads. I mean the three on the back were —.

*Int: So they were exposed at the back?*

MS: Yes, they were exposed, it was an open truck. And blimey we got away and about 5 kilometres later we came across a real road block because what had happened, they weren't bandits at all. They were the army that had been sent to arrest us because of this film that we were supposed to be making. So we got arrested and taken back to some army camp, and they wanted to confiscate the film and put us in a hole in the ground which they call a jail. But I said to Dickie [Bird], we can't let them confiscate this film. We've been 10 days up a mountain getting all this, struggling around at high altitude with heavy equipment, in stinging nettles. And I thought this is not on.

So while John [Sparks] and David [Attenborough] distracted the security people, Dickie and me were changing the labels on the film. We were putting exposed labels on unexposed rolls and then eventually we gave them the unexposed film, having hidden the exposed film. We were doing all this very surreptitiously, you know, with all these people, there must have been about 150 soldiers around the truck.

*Int: Good grief.*

*Int: So John and David were negotiating were they?*

MS: Well John and David were distracting the security people to keep their attention away from us and we successfully did that. They duly confiscated the unexposed rolls and we obviously thought they were going to open the tins and that was the end of that. In fact they didn't because when I got back they did return that film, and I did send one of the rolls off to be processed and it was clear. So they hadn't opened it but they could of so it might have been all a waste, a terrible waste. So that sequence might have been spoilt which would have been terrible really. Because at that time, it wasn't like now where tourists with groups go to see the gorillas, this was a huge experience.

*Int: Exploration. Would that have been the first film crew she'd [Dian Fossey] had there?*

MS: Well, apart from Bob [Campbell] that worked with her from *National Geographic* because he did some filming with her. Probably was the first full crew in a way that had gone there and done sound and all the rest of it, you know.

*Int: But that was just the first stage of that trip then?*

MS: That was the first stage and we managed to talk our way into a guesthouse in Ruhengeri, and in the morning we got escorted to a plane and the pilot in amazement, when he saw all this going on, said what on earth is happening, he was a Belgian pilot, and we said "we've been arrested" and he said, "God". And there was this security officer and he said "Get on the plane." So we got on the plane and then a security bloke tries to get on the plane, and this pilot says to him "where's your ticket" and the chap said "I haven't got a ticket, I'm the security officer". He said "I couldn't care less if you were the Queen of England, no ticket, no flight." So having been arrested by this bloke we took off and flew off without him.

He'd been tipped off back in Kigali and the plane landed in Kigali, and the pilot moved to the end of the runway and bundled me with my cases of gear out and I hid in a shed. And the plane went down to the terminal building, what there was of it, and subsequently this taxi arrived and I got bundled in this taxi. And keeping low in the taxi, we drove off to the hotel where we were all supposed to meet. Dickie arrived in another plane because we couldn't get everything on the first plane so while he was there he radioed for another plane to pick him up and the same thing happened to him,

In the meantime John and David were taken into the ministry in the centre of Kigali and cross-examined, and they subsequently found out that in fact they'd made a mistake and we weren't doing what we were accused of being doing. And they were released and we all met up in this hotel. And in fair to the Rwandans, having made the mistake, they did try to apologise by, I believe they waived the filming fees or something, which was a measure of apology. But it was all quite scary at the time. It's not often you're shot at really. I mean for wildlife filming I think humans are more dangerous than the animals most of the time actually.

Anyway we then had to go to Tanzania to film chimpanzees. And this pilot of this plane said "we've got a slot" and if we didn't make this slot, he was told that he was going to be shot down. So we hastily bundled into the plane and took off, and got out of there as quickly as possible before they changed their mind as well, of course. And anyway so off we go and we land at this airport in Tanzania, and there were no people in the airport. And so we taxied up and there we were and there's nobody and we weren't officially in the country. And so well we went through obviously and we took a wheel off the plane to stop it being nicked in the night. And we go through and we stay in a hotel and the following morning we turn up at the airport, but by that time there were people in the airport and we were coming from the wrong side. We were already in the country and there was this terrible pandemonium about how were we in the country illegally you know and all the rest of it.

Well we managed to talk our way through that and took off to go to this town, Kigoma I think it's called on Lake Tanganyika, where we were going to get a boat, a 24 hour boat trip to go to these chimpanzees. And on the way the pilot said all the beacons aren't working, I've no idea where we are. So I thought to myself what am I doing here, you pinch yourself and hope you're going to wake up in Cotham [Bristol, UK] sometime or other. He said can you keep an eye open through the clouds for some water. So we were all peering out of the window like mad and suddenly David [Attenborough] spotted some water. He said there's some water and the pilot turned, straight down through this gap in the clouds and arrived at the lake.

Well, we'd no idea where we were on the lake so we picked a direction and went off until we spotted a town, and then we buzzed the town till we saw a name and then looked on the map and said, "Oh, we're in the wrong direction", we're headed back inland and we arrived in Kigoma. The funny thing in Kigoma was David really because the customs people in Kigoma were giving us a hard time of it. And eventually they said, "Well who are you are you anyway" and David said, "well, we're from the BBC." This chap said "the BBC, my brother works in the BBC." So David said, "really, in the Swahili section?" which was a pretty good guess really knowing this was Africa. So "yes", he said, "John, do you know John?" "I met him only the other day before we came on this trip." "How is he?" said the bloke, "oh, he's fine, I'll give him your regards when we get back". So off we went and that was it. On to the boat and up to the chimpanzees and all this took place in three weeks, and we were back in Bristol three weeks later.

*Int: And what air time did you get do you think?*

MS: Something like 16, 17 minutes I think.

*Int: Which is absolutely amazing.*

MS: Well, it is.

*Int: Some of the most memorable film ever, still.*

MS: Absolutely. Absolutely. We joined a Japanese group to film the chimpanzees and we used to follow them through the forest, and sometimes they'd be behind us. And I remember going through the forest once and I heard this Japanese go "Agh" right behind. I thought, blimey, what's happened, and he leapt in front of me with a pair of chopsticks and he picked up faeces which had been dropped by the chimpanzees on the ground and put it into a plastic bag, and we all went off again. And they were doing a study as to what the chimpanzees were eating, and the result of this study actually was, I think they were there for two years - they decided that they'd eat anything that was going at the time.

#### **4. Martin's longest filming trip**

*Int: Apart from Life on Earth (14), obviously that was a three week trip. But was the longest trip do you think you've ever been on?*

MS: Somewhere between two and three months. I worked on a series with Mike Salisbury and Hugh Miles called The Kingdom of the Ice Bear (17), and the Arctic is a funny place really. I mean I always say I've got Arctic fever because when I'm there it's horrendous. It's freezing cold, it's difficult, struggling through snow and blizzards, and you're riding around on these snowmobiles which make a hell of a noise, and all the rest of it. You're trying to get shots of animals, polar bears, whatever, and you think, my God, what am I doing here? And then you come away and you think it's really a fantastic place, I'd like to go back, you know. It's a funny thing really but I think a lot of people have this. But we decided during Kingdom of the Ice Bear (17) that because of the harsh conditions and everything else, much more than two months and you got sort of saturated with it and you really did need a break from it. So in the main I think the trips were limited to two months.

I mean the thing about these trips is that that sort of wildlife filming, where you're contracted to do a job, for instance, as a one-man job, is very different to the sort of job where wildlife filmmakers spend a year of their time making a film. Because what you are supposed to do, you are supposed as a cameraman to go somewhere and obtain in a week or two material which is compatible with some of these people that have been studying these creatures for a year or more.

*Int: Yes. Very often I suppose you're taking like the golden nugget sequence from a one hour portrait of a landscape. You're expected to get that bit of behaviour as well.*

MS: That's right in time and you know it was quite difficult really. You required luck, judgement and patience I suppose.

*Int: And also, well, vast experience. How many countries do you think you've been to? I've heard tell that*

*you've worked in every state in America. Is that right?*

MS: I think almost, yes. I think there might be a couple in the middle that I've not been too. I've been to Hawaii and Alaska and Florida and Puerto Rico, if that's a state, and all the rest of them.

*Int: Is there any countries that you wished you'd been able to go to? Every type of vegetation type, habitat you've been to I'd say.*

MS: Yes I mean some of these trips I have to say were very hard on the equipment. I mean if I had a preference for a country, for purely practical reasons I'd pick a colder country. Because the tropics—. If you are cold you can put something on to get warm. If you're hot once you're stripped off that's all you can do, and so you can't do anything about that. So if I had to pick a favourite sort of place to film, if that's the way to put it, I'd pick a colder place for simply that reason, know.

*Int: You'd have condensation problems, I suppose, to deal with?*

MS: Yes, for the equipment. In the Arctic, for instance, in the equipment you have a real big decision to make because the equipment, you're working at temperatures of minus 30 but you're living in maybe a hut with temperature of above zero. So if you take the camera in, it immediately goes white and condenses and you've got to leave it, you mustn't open it or anything. You've just got to leave it until it dries off. You can do that or you can say, right, I'll accept that this camera's going to be freezing cold for a month and leave it in the sledge outside, in which case it gets saturated with cold. And I tend to take that route because I don't think that it's a very good idea for the camera to be heating up and cooling down and all the rest of it, so I tend to take the route, leave it in the sledge and hope it works the following morning.

*Int: But what about when you're in tropical regions with the humidity you know where you can't—. It's just super saturated air. What did you do with the camera there because presumably mould was growing on it on longer trips?*

MS: Well no, actually. No.

*Int: No?*

MS: This is one of the advantages of filming like this is that you're actually only there for a short period of time. It takes a while for mould to grow so I mean some of these filmmakers that go to the tropics for a year would have the mould problem. But I wouldn't necessarily have it if I was in one place for a week or two. And in addition, in the tropics you can take it into your hotel if you're in a hotel. Usually you spend two or three weeks in a tent or something like, and at some point you get to a hotel and you can take it into the hotel. And so you don't really have that problem.

The problem you've got really is the temperature changes. And I had to —. In the Arctic the oil tends to freeze up in the camera and if you put a freer running oil in, it's called winterising the camera, so that the camera would run in very cold conditions. If you then go to the tropics it's effectively not got any oil in it. So fortunately they did discover this oil which had a very wide operating range, which is very expensive. But I

put that in my camera and I was able to take it from the Arctic to the Caribbean on one trip, which is amazing for the equipment really.

*Int: Yes. I remember, it came to me last night, did you once tell me that through some problem on a canoe, your camera ended up at the bottom of the Amazon?*

MS: Oh yes, definitely.

*Int: It was wasn't it? What happened?*

MS: It was a tributary – I can't remember the name- but I was doing a programme in Brazil about a national park in the middle of Brazil. And I was working with a producer called Richard Matthews. And —.

*Int: That would have been Das Emas (18).*

MS: Emas, yes, which stands for emu I believe.

*Int: It's a lovely programme, I remember.*

MS: Well, he came up with this idea and I was getting in a boat and going down this river. He said "if we start off in the morning and we arrange to meet somebody further down the river at, say, 6 o'clock in the evening, then we drive back to the park." Great. Well, we got in this boat and I was doing all sorts of shots down the river and putting the camera underwater and all that sort of stuff. And the time went on, 6 o'clock arrived and we didn't seem to be there and it went on and on, and it got darker and darker. And 10 o'clock arrived and we thought blimey, and apparently there's this vegetation that grows out from the side of the river banks, and it forms like a fence. And eventually our boat got washed up against this fence and it turned over.

Well, I managed to grab the camera and I went with the boat. So I ended up sitting on the boat which was by the end upside down, wondering what to do. There were two scientists and Richard who were in the water, and Richard for obvious reasons trying to get on the boat and in doing it he sunk it, and me and the camera went in the river. So I didn't lose the camera, I still had hold of it, but obviously it had gone in the river. And I lost a couple of **magazines** and couple of things which disappeared forever. And we managed to struggle our way to the shore and then it was, where the devil are we, because we were in the middle of this swamp. There was fortunately we could see some stars so we headed in the direction that we thought the road might be. So we were struggling through these swamps. I think we were very, very lucky because we found out later there were all sorts of dangerous things, snakes and God knows what in this area, and we were splashing through all this lot. Eventually we came to a road and by this time it was 2 o'clock in the morning. And fortunately the people that were due to meet us had decided wisely that something had gone wrong and so they were driving up and down this road, and so they found us. And we got taken back to our camp where I tried to get the camera going but in fact I couldn't, so I had to send out for another one and they sent another one from England.

*Int: They did. I heard the story that you'd washed it and then with a hairdryer and it had come back to life again.*

MS: I did try all that but I couldn't get it back. But that was a major catastrophe in a way because I had to go back to Rio, which was the nearest place to get to, to have anything flown in directly. And I went back there and they flew another camera in. My wife was working on a drama at the time and Bristol were informed about this, and one of the electricians on the job she was working on came up and said to her, "he's all right, don't worry, he's all right." Daphne, my wife, said, "What do you mean he's all right?" she didn't know anything about it. He almost drowned but he's okay.

### **5. The most satisfying and rewarding filming trips**

*Int: Actually just some general questions, Martin. Out of all of the filming trips that you've done, what would you say has been the most satisfying and the most rewarding, you know, a bit of film you've captured?*

MS: That's a really difficult question, that is.

*Int: I can imagine.*

MS: Because honestly every trip is different and what is terrific about it really is the variety of work you get. I mean the gorillas obviously was a tremendous experience being with these gorillas, especially being by yourself with a family of 15 gorillas sitting round you. But I mean the polar bear, we did a polar bear special and I like the Arctic and I was filming polar bears hunting. And that was for one of the David Attenborough wildlife specials (19), for which I won a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) for which was very rewarding.

*Int: That was producer Martha Holmes, wasn't it?*

MS: Martha Holmes, yes. And I mean the lions in Life on Earth (14) we got the rare opportunity to study what the lions were doing and produce a sequence, rather than just go and take some shots of behaviour, you know.

*Int: But, as I've said to you, I think that sequence now, I don't know how many years afterwards, still stands up as one of the best I've ever seen on lions. And how did you —. I know it's the only shot I've ever seen of where the lionesses peel off in their classic hunting technique. And I know, you got it on the last morning was it? What actually happened?*

MS: We got the kill on the last morning. There started out with two crews on the lion thing. We were in the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania and trying to film a hunting sequence for The Hunters and The Hunted (20). And John Sparks, the producer, it was for Life on Earth (14), and John Sparks said we've got a real problem with The Hunters and The Hunted (20), and I said, why, "what problem have you got?" He said "We haven't got any hunting and hunted" So he said we're going to try and get some in the Ngorongoro Crater. So two crews, Mike Salisbury, Hugh Miles, myself and John Sparks went out there, and I imagined to film a serval cat leaping on something which was at least a hunt.

*Int: Predation.*

MS: Yes. And then Hugh and me both were in the right place at the right time to film a pair of cheetahs hunting and killing something. And I believe Hugh managed to film a lion kill. And so at that point, because Hugh had to do some work in Nairobi I believe, so he was anxious to get away anyway and John decided, well, we've got the serval, we've got the cheetahs, we've also got a lion kill, albeit not a particularly wonderful one in the distance type of thing and dust. Because that was the big problem seeing all this through the dust. And in fact, when we studied the rushes afterwards we found that we'd actually filmed about three lion kills but we couldn't see them because it was too dusty. And you could only see them when you concentrated on the film.

And anyway, so the crew was reduced. We didn't cut our time there because we were waiting for David Attenborough and the rest of the crew to come out to do some sound pieces with David for the programmes. And so we waited there, John and myself, and so we got to know what these lions were doing, and we also got to know where we should be because they were basically hunting a group of wildebeest that were down by a marsh. And they were trapped really in terms of running away by the marsh. And so in fact on the very last day after David and Dickie [Bird] and the assistant had arrived, they were in the back of the Land Rover when we suddenly saw this.

Now I'd already filmed this shot which was crucial to the thing, as you say, with them all creeping and then one lioness peeling off and going around the back, waiting in ambush. And we suddenly saw this hunt starting and much to David's amazement we saw this happening, and we said, "Right, we've got to get there." So John drove the Land Rover to this little mound that we'd spotted and bugged the Land Rover on top of the mound, switched the ignition off, by which time I was already running the camera because you could see this lioness starting to move. And I got on to it and it went on and on and on and on, and eventually, the shot with these wildebeest in the foreground and over the top in panic. And over the top of them you could see this lioness and eventually leaping on a wildebeest. And that's what happened there.

*Int: Was that with using a door mount or you're up through the roof?*

MS: Door mount, yes. I remember sending the rushes back to Bristol because when the first crew went back they took the rushes we'd done already. Well, lion kills are quite bloody actually by the time you get to the lions eating. It's all right until they come to eat it but you've got to get some shots of them eating, and I got a message from the lab representative saying "that half of his staff had gone off sick looking at the rushes." And I sent a message back saying "stick around for the next lot and the other half will go."

*Int: It would've been Ken Clack at the time*

MS: Ken Clack, absolutely.

*Int: So in those situations obviously you do come across distressing moments but you've got a job to do. Like you said, you don't want to dwell too much on the suffering but how do you focus yourself or did you focus it? Or do you just get neutralised because you were looking through the lens?*

MS: That's relatively simple to answer. The responsibility is not the cameraman's. If you film something like that what you do is you film the whole thing, blood and everything, and then it's up to the editor and the producer what they include. But you've got to present all the stuff.

*Int: Yes. I suppose at the heat of the moment you cannot have an editorial head, you've just got to get the shots and get the sequences.*

MS: Well, that's right. You have an editorial head in as much as you need to get shots for a sequence because although that lion kill was filmed over several weeks, and a lot of lion hunts were cut together to make the final version. It wasn't all one lion hunt although the last part of it was one, that last hunt. But you've got to think how all this is going to cut together because if you shoot one thing and you need a shot and it's bright sunlight, and then you do the main bit in the shade, you think, well, that's not going to cut together. So you have to try and figure out a way to get shots to put something between sometimes.

*Int: And each night you'd be analysing that in the tent, would you? Was Mike Salisbury with you at that time?*

MS: Mike Salisbury, Hugh Miles and John Sparks, yes.

*Int: So you'd work out what was happening.*

MS: Yes, we'd have discussions back and say what did you get and all the rest of it because—. But sometimes we worked together. Fortunately when the cheetahs happened Hugh and me were in the same place. But we were basically —. I remember there were two prides of lions which we were concentrating on and sometimes I was with one and Hugh was with the other, you know.

*Int: But that sort of attention to detail meant that those shots, as I said, I've still haven't seen them bettered and I used them in a lion film over 20 years later. I remember you picked up on it, "was that my shot" you said. Typical. But actually staying with camera technique. Sometimes it must be quite frustrating for you because you're off by yourself, the producer's not there, and he doesn't know what you have to go through to get it. And sometimes you think you've got it and they don't think you have. So how —.*

MS: Well, that's right. I mean I did one trip by myself for Life on Earth (14), and I was out in the States and I was going all over and I was doing a sync piece with David [Attenborough] up here and then trundling off and doing some specialist stuff somewhere else, and then meeting up again and going to somewhere else, and so on and so on.

And one of these jobs I was sent to a zoo in Dallas to film a rattlesnake striking. And I rigged myself up with this rattlesnake and we were trying to get it to strike, and it's really quite difficult because they're not going to just strike at anything. So we tried all sorts of things. We put a bucket over the top of the snake I remember and then took the bucket off and the snake comes up. But when it came up like that it didn't have its fangs out, it was just surprised.

*Int: Oh right, yes.*

MS: So eventually we got it to strike straight towards the camera with its fangs out towards a dead mouse or something that we had underneath the lens. So it came straight towards the camera and I did it about three times and I did it at 200 frames a second, no, 400 frames a second. I had a special camera to do 400



frames a second.

*Int: Was that the lowcam that can do that, yes?*

MS: Yes, it was. I filmed it on a camera called a lowcam at 400 frames a second. I couldn't see it in the viewfinder, one minute the snake was there, the next minute it was gone. So I filmed it several times to make sure because there was absolutely no way I could tell whether I'd got it or not. And I sent all this film back and I got a report back from the producer saying, well, it was a good try about the rattlesnake but you missed it. I thought to myself I couldn't have missed it. When I got back I went into the editing room and asked the editor if I could see this film, and I reeled it through slowly. And what had happened was that it was so fast even at 400 frames that when - one shot was of the snake like that [indicates mouth opening in stages], the next shot was like that, the next shot was like that with its fangs and the next shot it was gone. So at 400 frames a second it took three frames for this thing to strike.

And the problem with telling me that I hadn't got it was, they'd watched it in the viewing theatre —.

*Int: On a projection.*

MS: On a projection, which you couldn't wind through slowly, and so in the projection room they'd seen just what I'd seen at the time. They saw a snake like that and then it was gone, and you couldn't see the frames in between. If you look at that frame on Life on Earth (14) it's slightly out of focus and it's not out of focus, it's just that it's moving even at 400 frames a second too quickly. It's incredible.

*Int: Actually I've spoken to a number of editors and they said that you were very keen whenever you were in Bristol to come in and view your rushes, and that was one of the reasons why you improved your technique. Is that something you really kind of made sure you did because obviously you're away from the country a lot? And so what happened, at what stages would you come in?*

MS: Well, I'd go into the editing room without trying to make a nuisance of myself but not necessarily to oversee the rushes but to ask if the editor wanted any information because an editor in an editing room is out cold as far as the actual environment and the action is concerned. And all he can see of it is the film that you've produced, and sometimes it's useful for the editor to know what situations surrounded the actual film and it helped him in the editing. So I always used to go in whenever I could just to say is there anything I can help you with.

*Int: I think it really showed and going on to camera technique, and actually I include myself along with John Sparks then about doubting your ability at the time. Because I challenged you that you would not film this bird singing because it would only sing in little bursts of three or four seconds, and with a 600mm lens there wasn't enough time to actually get on to it in focus. And you guaranteed me that you did it and we had a bet I seem to remember.*

MS: Yes, we did.

*Int: And I know, I've worked in the past, and it is so hard. It's one of the hardest things, small animals, big landscapes, long lenses. People have sighting strips as the people stand behind the camera. How did you perfect that because I still to this day do not know anybody faster with a long lens than you? I really don't.*



# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

MS: A lot of people, as you say, use sights but a sight on the end of a lens which you look through the other eye and you put the sight on the subject, and then if you put the sight in the right place, the long lens is on the subject. But that requires you always being in the exact same position as far as the camera because if you move your head the sight is going up and down, you can't guarantee. So what I do is I've got this technique where I look through the camera with one eye and I look at the creature with the other eye, and I sort of mentally superimpose the two images until they're on top of one another.

*Int: So actually just to explain. You've got **crosshairs**, haven't you, in the camera screen so you could superimpose the **crosshairs** and the —?*

MS: Not the **crosshairs**, the subject.

*Int: Not even that. No, just the subject.*

MS: Yes.

*Int: You didn't even need a cross over reference?*

MS: No, not all. When you look through, in the lens you can see, say, a bird on a branch and with your other eye you can also see the bird on the branch. So if you move the camera so that the image you see through the lens, the bird is on top of the bird that you're seeing through the eye which is not on the lens, then it's on the film. And it's an almost instant way of actually picking up a shot.

*Int: Yes. But what you'd also do is as soon as you see a bit of behaviour happening, you switch on the camera.*

MS: Yes, absolutely.

*Int: And so when you're on there you're already running. So you shot for the shot not for the aesthetics and the camera in the editing room.*

MS: Well, yes, that's right. I mean a lot of people I don't think do that. But if you don't run the camera until you get the shot focused then you might miss the shot. So if it's better to have a bit of out of focus stuff and then focus it up, and you get the shot. But I have to say some people won't do that because they don't think it looks good in the viewing theatre and it might give them a bad reputation.

*Int: Just for the record you did get the shot of the saddleback and I did buy you the drink. Talking about, again with the film cameras, you didn't have that luxury of knowing whether you got the shot. And I asked you earlier on about what was the most satisfying moment. I've heard certain people in the editing room say that some of the loveliest footage they've ever seen was of some slow motion horses that you shot. Because obviously at the time you didn't know what you'd got. You obviously knew —.*

[www.wildfilmhistory.org](http://www.wildfilmhistory.org)



MS: Well, I had a good idea because of experience but it was slow motion, and that was for a series, another [David] Attenborough series called *The First Eden* (21), which was four films in the life in the Mediterranean. And they wanted some Camargue horses beautifully shot for end credits on one film. Funnily enough near Marseilles, and I'd been through Marseilles going to Corsica and going to various places, Arles, and round the corner from the Camargue several times. I used to say to the producer, Andrew Neil, "well, why don't I go to the Camargue and get these horses." He said, "no, we don't worry about that, there's plenty of those around, we've got loads of those." And so I was never sent there. And eventually when they came to put the films together, he came up to me and he says, look, the only Camargue horses we can find is somewhere in France. They want a fortune for those, it's on 35mm an old film, and all sorts of stuff. So he says can you whip out to the Camargue and get these horses. So by myself I went to the Camargue and I filmed these horses. Well, the trick about that was making sure that you filmed them in the right conditions with the sun backlit, backlit water and all the rest of it, you know.

*Int: They were stunning images and I think, like you said earlier on about your satisfying moments, that must have been a good one.*

MS: Yes, it was. It was very satisfying to see the results at the end and it was very satisfying to see the way they used it in the film. Because in fact the way they used it in the film was something which I had a vague idea of at the time, that I did lots of shots of horses, wide angle and close-ups. Then I did a couple of shots where I started reasonably wide and let the horse come towards the camera, and as it came closer and closer, moved from one part of it to the other. And eventually on a long lens it came so close to the camera that the film went black and that was the 'made in Bristol' credit.

## **6. Dangerous and disappointing filming trips**

*Int: There are so many wonderful moments. But people don't realise that there are the bad moments too. You eluded to it earlier on, that there's two lots of bad moments. There's having a problem with the animals but also probably more so the problems with the people. Can you describe maybe what would be one of your more, say, more disappointing filming trips? Or —. And then lead perhaps onto some of the more dangerous, scary ones due to the location you were in.*

MS: Well, yes. The disappointing filming trips are really the trips where you don't get the results that you hoped to get. And fortunately for me that's been fairly few and far between. But I do remember one trip where I went to Africa to film a hunting dog sequence, and I was working actually with Jonathan Scott. And we were trying to find these hunting dogs and after a few days we realised that actually they'd gone and there weren't any hunting dogs there. After a few days I said to him this is hopeless really, we're not really getting anywhere. And so we curtailed the trip and came back early.

*Int: Was that in the Masai Mara?*

MS: Yes, it was.

*Int: Yes. I remember that last group of dogs that were there.*

MS: And well, what they'd done I think is they'd migrated but usually you found these dogs by looking at a herd of wildebeest and you saw a hole in them, and usually there'd be something in the middle of it. But there was nothing like that and we searched for several days, as I say, and we didn't. So that's very disappointing, you have to come back to the producer and say, well look, I'm sorry, but I'm back early because they weren't there and it would have been a waste of money to stay on. Fortunately you get a reputation if you say that, there's no reflection on your ability. But that is disappointing.

*Int: And what about where you mentioned earlier about the bandits in Africa? Have there been other dangerous times where you thought I might not come out of this one?*

MS: Well, environments are dangerous of course. I meant the Arctic's dangerous. Going around in snowmobiles is dangerous, you've got to know whether you're on thin ice and you're going to plunge through, for instance. So those sort of things are dangerous. You were working with polar bears, that's dangerous because they do attack and they're incredibly fast. They look really nice and cuddly but they are actually very fast.

*Int: Is it true they were hunting you and not the seals for the Wildlife Special (19)?*

MS: It is, yes, and that's one of the funny moments really because I saw this polar bear walking and I saw this seal pup in the hole. And the polar bear in the distance spotted me and I think he thought that dinner had arrived. So he started coming towards me. I had a starter pistol, a pistol to scare off and not shoot the bear but to scare it off and I had somebody with me with a rifle and all that if things got really bad at hand. But it saw me and it was coming towards me. So I actually moved the camera and put the camera so that the seal pup was directly between me and the polar bear, and the polar bear was coming towards me and it hadn't seen the seal pup. Then when it got closer it suddenly realised that there was a seal pup there and it stopped and looked, and then it started creeping up. Then it ran and dived down into the hole and the seal pup by this time had gone. So the bear came up, looked at me and shook itself off, looking as I thought very embarrassed. And although the bear —.

*Int: How does that look? An embarrassed polar bear?*

MS: It's face turned red. Although the bear had started coming towards me because I was dinner, I don't think it had the effrontery to carry on after making such a mess of what it was trying to do in the first place. So it just turned around and walked away.

*Int: That's a classic image though, that was the first hunt I'd ever seen actually.*

MS: It was amazing. I think it was the first time I ever filmed because we'd just settled into the cabin and we went out and that was first, and we thought, blimey, we're going to get a polar bear kill on the first morning. Well, it didn't happen of course.

*Int: Well, that's maybe the most scary moment with animals. But what about with —.*

MS: No, that's not the most scary moment, no.

*Int: Isn't it?*

MS: No. A scary moment with animals are few and far between I have to say. I don't think that was at all scary and in truth I've very seldom been scared by animals. I was never worried at all with the gorillas, I never felt they were anything but friends actually. But what did scare me was on *The Life of Birds* (22) when I was filming in the Galapagos Islands birds hunting fish, gulls plunging into the water.

And I was underwater getting shots of birds coming, plunging in the water. Well these little fish were near the surface and the reason these fish were near the surface is because there were big fish underneath which were hunting the little fish. So they were forced up to the surface in which the case the gulls were having a go. I was aware of this, of course but you know. So I suddenly felt a whack on my knee and I looked down and I saw the tail fin of a shark disappearing. And I thought I think I shouldn't really be here. So I waved to the Zodiac with the producer, Mike Salisbury, in it and he came towards me. And I saw this shark once more and I'm given to understand that sharks check you out three times, and on the third time they might have a go at you. Well, I'd seen this shark twice and I thought enough's enough. And so they pulled me out of the water and I said there's a shark down there, and Mike said, "I know, I've just seen, it's nine feet long."

So I think that was dangerous but few and far between. And I said, well how we going to get these shots. Mike said you're not going in that water again and he wouldn't let me go in the water again, not that I particularly wanted to go in the water again.

*Int: Quite right. What about with people and pirates?*

MS: Well, people, they are the most dangerous things. I mean in many ways being shot at in Rwanda because we were supposed to be making a film that we weren't making, about the gorillas. A difficult thing is sometimes you're travelling and you're in a departure lounge or customs lounge in an airport, and some official gives you the impression that you have to give him some money otherwise you won't be let on the plane. I think this is one of the most difficult decisions to make because when you're in that position it's either, if you don't give him the money you're not going to get on the plane. But then again if you do give him the money and he's leading into a trap, you could be accused of bribing a government official, and that is a very dangerous situation to be in I think.

The more practical danger, I think, happened in a series called *Wildlife Safari to Thailand* (23), where a producer called Jeffery Boswall and myself were on this uninhabited island. Now this uninhabited island at that time was Phuket. Sorry not Phuket. This uninhabited island was an island called Pi Pi Lei which was off Phuket in Thailand, which has subsequently been developed into a holiday resort and was devastated by the Tsunami almost two years ago now. But at the time we were there, we were camped on this little beach and we knew that in the area there were pirates. And one day we saw this boat coming through the entrance into the lagoon and we were very suspicious, so the four of us stood up. Jeffery went down towards the water and I with another chap went around the back through a bit of forest, to surprise them from the rear if necessary with rifles and things. And that's not really in the job description you know, when you apply to be a wildlife cameraman you don't get told that you might have to fend off pirates.

*Int: So you had a rifle then?*

MS: Yes, we had to have guns with us to defend ourselves because it's a very dangerous situation, pirates. They were working on two basis. They'd rob a small fishing boat and take the catch and let the fishing boat go because they wanted it to catch more fish. But they'd rob a bigger syndicate boat and they'd kill the people on board and sink the ship because they knew the syndicate would provide another boat you see.

Anyway, so we went round the back of this forest and halfway around we met two people from the so-called pirate ship which surprised us. We were there with rifles all of us looking at each other wondering what to do next. And it turned out that it was a fishing boat and the captain of the fishing boat had contracted some illness and he had heard that we were on the island and we might have medical supplies, and he came into see if we could help him.

*Int: So they didn't think you were pirates?*

MS: No. Well, they thought we might be pirates because they weren't sure. They weren't sure whether they were in the right place or not. So they were taking the precaution of not taking any chances basically. But they were hoping they'd found the people that they thought had medical supplies, which they obviously had.

*Int: Actually a slight digression on this because on the Wildlife Safaris (23) with Jeffery, I think you have got a record for the greatest number of cases that ever went out from the BBC.*

MS: Incredible. I mean I took, because we were filming underwater on Pi Pi Lei as well as in the forest and we knew there were cages with birds that were making nests for bird's nest soup and stuff like that. We were doing this whole programme on this island and in order to do that I took the camera and lots of film, underwater camera and a tripod actually as well. I think I was one of the first people that built an underwater tripod because I thought to myself, if I'm filming underwater - when I film out of the water I use a tripod whenever possible - why should I change that when I'm underwater? And so I got the Engineering Department in the BBC at Bristol to build me this underwater tripod which was made of some plastic compound and stainless steel which didn't rust.

And anyway so I had all that equipment and it amounted to about 12 boxes. Well, I have to say Jeffery was known for a lot of cases, always, and he took everything with him really - reference books, a desk, his standard lamp, a typewriter. And we came to load the boat and in fact we did wish that Jeffery wasn't there. So unknown to me, I say, my friend that I was working with slipped Jeffery a sleeping tablet. Jeffery came down for breakfast, and I think he put this in his coffee or something, anyway he went back to bed and went to sleep. So the boat arrived and we loaded this up and we got to something like 85 cases, and we realised that there was no way we were going to get all this on the boat. There were 110 cases in all so we had to have a second boat and I didn't know what was in these cases, I had no idea. There were obviously the tents and all our essential equipment.

But when we arrived on the island and we'd all rigged up the camp, and I looked at Jeffery's tent it was quite extraordinary. It was like a library inside and in the porch of the tent was a desk with the typewriter and the standard lamp, and it had a little lead going round to the generator to run the standard lamp, the table lamp rather, at the back. He'd like moved his office out there. Most extraordinary.

*Int: That's great. Actually going back about bribing and that awful kind of situation you can get yourself in. Is it true that you were able to bribe and get some kit onto a flight when nobody else could get on to the aeroplane? A priest —*

MS: No, I think you are talking about when I went to Corfu.

*Int: A priest wanted to thank God.*

MS: That, yes that was funny. We were making a film, I think it was called *Monkey in the Mirror* (24), with Karen Bass. And we went to the Congo, Zaire it was then actually, and we flew from Nairobi on a plane which was run by a missionary service, and so they always had a priest on board. And so we went through this —. We landed in Zaire in this airport in customs, then we were going in of course, and we were asked questions, showed our passports and all that. I remember seeing this fellow. Anyway we got in the plane, we went off. And a few weeks later we came back and we arrived in this airport and we were all offloaded. There was the pilot, the priest, us and lots of people that had been doing various jobs in Zaire – you know, missionaries and health workers and all sorts.

So we were all offloaded from the plane and we all went into the airport, where they promptly started opening up all the cases and turning them out. I saw this customs bloke there and I went up to him, and I said, “Is this really necessary.” He says, “Well, I have got a brother in Nairobi who needs an operation” and I said “really.” He said, “Well, this operation's going to cost \$50” or whatever it was. I said, “Well, do you know, I think we might be able to help him with his operation” and he said, “Well, come with me.” So we went round the back and I said to him “I will help you with \$50 but do you think you could help us through this airport without having to open all these cases?” Because we were going to be there for hours. They'd have turned out all my boxes of camera gear and all the rest of it.

*Int: And the film stock I suppose.*

MS: Film stock, oh God. Anyway so he said, “oh yes, I think we can sort that out.” So I gave him the \$50 and as if by magic when we got into the customs shed, all the boxes that had been opened were shut up and they didn't want to see any more. We all got back on the plane and the plane took off with great relief from everybody.

As we took off, the priest said I think we should say a prayer. So he started off by saying, “Well, thank you God for making our trip to Zaire very successful and thank you for making the BBC's filming trip successful, and also thank you for helping us through the customs, making it easy for us to get on the plane and be on our way.” And the pilot turned round to the priest, and he said I think you should thank Martin Saunders for that as well because he had seen what I was doing. He knew that I'd bribed the bloke to let us back on the plane. But he thought, ‘well, I'm doing all right so I won't interrupt him’ and I didn't know he'd seen me.

*Int: The amount of wheeler dealing you have to do as part of the job was amazing at that time, wasn't it?*

MS: It is, and when you're in this situation as a wildlife cameraman, actually the proportion of time you spend filming is relatively low, in the region of 20% - 25% I'd say, compared with what surrounds it. Like the travel, the customs arrangements, the organisation and dealing with people and all sorts.

*Int: Well, it can save thousands of pounds as well, you know, being able to allow your baggage on without paying excessive baggage, and also I think in the past you've done things so you don't have to get helicopters and things.*

MS: Yes. In the Arctic I was in a mining camp actually and we'd got dropped off in this mining camp, and it was enormously expensive in the Arctic to use helicopters. I'd been up there for a while and I'd got a certain relationship with the pilots, so they knew who I was and everything and we'd had a laugh and all the rest of it. And when we came to leave I thought, well, I wonder if we can get a Twin Otter in here because it looked long enough to me, and a Twin Otter's an amazing little plane. It sort of stops on a postage stamp almost, with **tundra** tyres and all the rest of it. So I called up this pilot and said "Do you think you could get the Twin Otter to land here". And he said "I don't know." He said "I'm actually coming there by helicopter to do something so I'll have a look." So he turns up in this helicopter and he said "Now where do you think I should land there?" And I said, "well, what about over there? It's 24 hour daylight and we walked up and down this proposed runway and he was pointing out rocks and pits, and he said, "Well, I need these rocks removed and I need pits filled in and all that, do you think you can do that?" So I was saying to the miners up there, I was saying, "Well, do you think we could do that?" And they said, "Yes, we can sort that out."

So when he'd left we were out there with picks, shovels and dynamite blowing rocks up and then filling the holes in to make a flat surface for this Twin Otter to land. And he called me up and he said "Have you done everything we said?" And I said, "Yes, everything's done." Fortunately he trusted me and he came and landed the Twin Otter, and this was in the 1980s, you know. The price that we saved getting out of there in a Twin Otter as opposed to a helicopter amounted in those days to about £3,000.

*Int: Amazing. I better that never got put on the spreadsheet back home?*

MS: No. I never got a percentage of it either, you know. But the producer did buy me a beer I remember.

*Int: What a surprise. Gosh. Fantastic.*

## **7. The people Martin has most enjoyed working with and those that inspired him**

*With the people you've worked with over the years, who have you been the most pleased to work with actually during your career? Would it be David Attenborough? Who are those people who inspired you from the camera side and also in front of camera, producers?*

MS: I mean to get into the camera side I supposed I was inspired by really the first films I'd seen and wanting to do that. And also I really liked travel and wildlife filming does give you the opportunity to travel, and one of the advantages of it, you can travel to places and you can do things which, no matter how much money you've got, it's almost impossible to do privately. Because in order to do some of the things you do need a huge backup of enthusiastic people like scientists, researchers and the reputation of the BBC, in order to be allowed in to do some of these things. And so as far as getting into that is concerned, once I've got an interest in it, and Attenborough did figure largely in that because that was one of the first things I'd seen him in, Zoo Quest (5). But there are very few people that I've worked with that I don't like working with. I do enjoy working with you, whether it's reciprocated or not I don't know.

*Int: I'll buy you another drink later. That's the right thing to say.*



MS: I think the first time we worked was on Land of the Eagle (25), wasn't it?

*Int: It was, yes, 1996, no, 1986.*

MS: In the infamous Laramie.

*Int: Yes, it was.*

MS: We had a good time there, didn't we?

*Int: We did. I think that'll have to be another interview to go through that story. So on the camera side, it would have been Charles Lagus would it, the cameraman you'd been watching who did the Zoo Quest (5)?*

MS: Yes, I think it was.

*Int: And what Heinz Sielmann and his team on the Armand and Michaela Denis series (26).*

MS: Heinz Sielmann, yes.

*Int: On the Armand and Michaela Denis series (26).*

MS: It's funny, they did a Wildlife Talkabout (27) and 25 year anniversary of the Natural History Unit, and I was asked to appear on a programme. And I appeared on this with David Attenborough and Desmond Morris and we went out for dinner. There was, I think, four programmes and two of the people on this programme were Armand and Michaela Denis.

*Int: Oh, really?*

MS: Yes. Armand wasn't there but Michaela was, so I met her and then I did a book signing thing with Heinz Sielmann would you believe.

*Int: Of woodpecker fame.*

MS: Yes, absolutely. So we were sat at this desk signing books. I was signing Life on Earth books (28) and he was signing books about woodpeckers I suppose.

*Int: Yes, he did, yes, My Life with Woodpeckers (29). Yes, gosh. You said, and I agree, there's very, very few people, I think everybody has a passion for wildlife and wanting to get the best, and so you very rarely have cross words and what have you, I suppose. Did you ever have any problems with accountants, you*

*know? Because obviously in a way you had to work around without any guidelines, and you were doing things which you couldn't put on the spreadsheets. But you were saving the BBC at the same time thousands of pounds of money. Did you get flak for any of that?*

MS: I didn't. The people that get the flak from accountants and all that are the people like you, the producers, who if they overspend get criticised for it. But I mean I like to think that my reputation was such that if I was in a situation by myself, and I know it to be the case several times, that if I came across a difficult situation and one I do remember was when I was filming humpbacked whales. And because of fog I was going to Boston from Newfoundland and I was due to join a ship called the Regina Maris which is a bargetine, which went out to the banks off Boston to look for humpbacked whales. It was a research ship and because of the fog in Newfoundland, I arrived in Boston and the ship had left and I thought, well, this is disastrous. And so I'd started figuring out ways of how I could get to this ship, and I figured out three ways of getting there. And one of them was a speedboat. Well, they were all different expenses so I called up the producer, Richard Brock, and I said, "well look, this is the situation because of fog I've missed the boat." I said, "Well, I've figured out what I can do about it, there are three ways of doing it and they're all different expenses." He said to me, "Well, you do the one you think's best and that's it." So that's what I did and he backed me up all the way. And in fact, I got there with a speedboat. I rented this high speed boat and we charged off out, and found the Regina Maris in time for the speedboat to actually return to Boston in the daylight. Because that was one of the difficulties, where exactly was this boat. We radioed the Regina Maris and the skipper gave us the co-ordinates we was at, and I talked to this speedboat captain, "do you think you can get there and back?" He said, "Yes, I think we can do that". So off we went.

*Int: Actually reflecting back now a little bit, is there any animal or programme you wished you'd made? Looking at your CV it goes on and on, there must be hundreds of different programmes that you've made.*

MS: I don't know really. I've filmed almost everything on the earth I think really. But —.

*Int: Well, certainly the largest, the smallest, David [Attenborough] in the most bizarre locations, the 'vomit comet' comes to mind.*

MS: Yes, well, the zero gravity filming.

*Int: Yes, almost in space basically.*

MS: I mean that was not a wildlife camera job, was it?

*Int: And again it goes back to your development and the experience you've got in Cardiff and being able to do all of these things. You are a complete all-rounder really.*

MS: All-rounder, yes. Well, that's the sort of thing that not trained for these days really, and it's very difficult for people now to, I think, start out in the business. Because in the first instance it's difficult to get training and it's difficult to get training in ways of working in television, let alone ways of working in wildlife film-making. And then, of course, even if you know your stuff and you can do the work, you end up in a catch-22 situation, where you have to prove that you can do the job to a producer but the producer's not going to believe you can do the job until you've done one, and that you've got that situation. So I always say to people the best

thing to do is to go out with a video camera and make a very simple little sequence, sequence not shots, of some animal, and present a very short little film to show that you actually know what you're doing. And I think that's about the only way you can do it these days really, and then knock at a few doors.

*Int: Yes. Did you work much on video in the end?*

MS: No.

*Int: No? You don't miss that —?*

MS: No, I don't. I know about video. I prefer film, I think video still looks artificial to be honest. I think film has still got the atmosphere that video hasn't got but I have used video. I use video underwater sometimes because underwater I think it's about the only place it's superior to film. But I remember I was filming off Florida once and I had an underwater camera. I was asked if I'd do a test with an underwater camera for a company there, while I was in Florida and I said yes. So they gave me this camera and I took it out to a reef off the Florida Keys, and I went down with it and all the rest of it. With these video cameras you can adjust the contrast and the colour balance and all sorts of things and I realised that after a very short while that the picture I was looking at I didn't now what it was. I didn't know whether it was accurate or not. So I went back and suggested something which they eventually incorporated into their equipment which they referred to, typically American, as the zap button. This zap button what it did is, when you pressed it, it produced on the monitor the correct balance as the camera was set up for, and then you could see how that related to the way you'd set the controls underwater, and they found that very useful.

*Int: You know, talking about video cameras coming in and I suppose more programmes now shot on high definition than there are on film. But do you watch a lot of wildlife films now and how do you think they hold up? You know for example, what would be the wildlife film or series of films which you think has been the most groundbreaking or is the landmark series?*

MS: Well, without any doubt Life on Earth (14) and I don't say that because I worked on it. But the fact is that before Life on Earth (14) was made there was no series like that ever made. I believe that they spoke - Chris Parsons and David [Attenborough] and John Sparks and company - spoke after things like The Ascent of Man (30), and talked the BBC into giving natural history a chance on a series like that and this series of evolution. Well, nobody knew then when we were making it how successful it would be. We did a few shots. There was a thought about doing the making of Life on Earth (14) during it, so in the African plains. Hugh Miles took a couple of shots of me and I took a couple of shots of Hugh and that's about as far as it went really because they decided then that if they made this making of film, they felt it was going to pre-empt the success of the series, because nobody what the reaction to this would be. Because the evolutionary series, it's quite difficult to start because you have to start with very small, comparatively uninteresting, although very pretty, small creatures. And it's not until you get well into the series that you get to animals and birds and things that people can really relate to. So we didn't really know whether it was going to be the success it was. But it turned out to be an amazing success and I say that's one of the most important series because I really do believe that it led to the making of the subsequent series, The Living Planet (13).

*Int: The Life trilogies (31).*

MS: Yes, The Living Planet (13), Trials of Life (32) but also things like Flight of the Condor (33), The

Discovery of Animal Behaviour (34), well, all of them really and after that series were made not just the individual programmes.

*Int: Was there any individual programme that you thought that is fantastic, I wish I'd made that, or you did make it yourself?*

MS: I can't offhand think of one like that. I mean the thing about wildlife films is that they're all so varied. The subjects are so varied that you think to yourself, well, my goodness me, that's really good that is. Then you see something else which is totally different and you think, well, that's incredible. So I think the standard of wildlife films is very high actually.

*Int: It must be quite a buzz for you. Obviously you see the Life on Earth (14) clips quite often. But what did your family think, parents, well, even your son, when they know that was filmed by their son, or —? What was that like?*

MS: Well, my father unfortunately died during the filming of Life on Earth (14) but my mother was obviously very proud, and typically David, he gave her a book of Life on Earth (14). He wrote in it 'To Martin's mother, thank you very much to Martin's mother without whom Life on Earth (14) couldn't have been made, David'. Which really chuffed her, but that's typically David actually, isn't it?

*Int: It is, yes, and what about Alex [Saunders], how does he think?*

MS: I think Alex pretends I didn't make them.

*Int: Typical son.*

MS: I think he's embarrassed by the whole thing.

*Int: Well, I think what an amazing career. You must have a fantastic collection of photographs of your travels around the world.*

MS: Yes, but they're all in films you know. My home movies are films.

*Int: What about photographs?*

MS: I have not got very many still photographs, and the reasons I haven't got very many still photographs is that I've got a small camera which I take souvenir shots. A little Olympus and I've had it for years, it's still going, and it's incredibly reliable, and I take souvenir shots. But I don't take many shots of animal behaviour and stuff like that because when I'm there I should be filming it. If I think I'd be embarrassed if I took a still shot of something that I was trying to film, and then it was on my souvenir picture but not on the film, and that wouldn't be very good. So I've got relatively few shots of animals.



*Int: Do you have record for how long a roll of film has been in your stills camera?*

MS: My wife gets very annoyed with me about this I have to say because she produces albums, and she puts these albums in sequence and every now and again she does all this. Then I come to the end of a film in my little camera which is 30 odd pictures long, which I might have started two years ago. I give her these pictures and she looks in horror and says, "My God, that's two years ago", and then she has to shuffle all these pictures up the album in order to get the other ones in. So I get in real trouble about this.

*Int: Sorry to ask that one Martin, just came to mind.*

MS: I bet.

*Int: Is there any kind of comment, final comment you'd like to make in fact to where you think wildlife film-making is going or about your time in wildlife film-making?*

MS: Well, I mean I've had a wonderful time in wildlife film making. I've been to places which few people ever get to go to and done things which few people ever get to do, and work with people who I'm very proud to have worked with. None the least obviously David Attenborough but he's a tremendous person to work with and a great companion round the campfire and all that, and very supportive.

But in terms of where it's going, I mean high definition is one thing I suppose, it is going to high definition. But I've always believed in things like 3D and holograms. Now people think I'm a maniac when I talk about holograms but at the moment holograms are something you can, from the outside, look into. But with technology developing, I can't believe that at some point they're going to produce something which allows you to be inside with what you're seeing, and a herd of elephants will come charging through your front room, you know. When that technology arrives that is going to be truly amazing. I mean it's partly arrived I suppose you could say by these visual helmets that you get, and you really are in the place. When they produce that for your front room, I think that is going to be an amazing development.

*Int: Well I bet when they want to film those first images to go in that, I know who's going to be putting their name forward. Martin, that's been absolutely fantastic, thoroughly enjoyed it and thank you very much for coming in.*

MS: Pleasure.

**END**





## Glossary

**Arriflex BL:** A reflex 35 mm camera

**Blimp:** A sound-proof case for a film camera to prevent noise from the camera reaching the microphone, and the subject

**Crosshairs:** A shape superimposed on an image within an eyepiece that is used for precise alignment of a device or a sighting reference

**Demand valve:** A regulator which is used in a scuba set and supplies the diver with breathing gas at ambient pressure when inhalation starts

**Diopters:** A unit of measure of the refractive power of a lens, having the dimension of the reciprocal of length and a unit equal to the reciprocal of one meter

**ISO button:** Denotes how sensitive the image sensor is to the amount of light present.

**Macro lens:** A lens used to bring into focus objects very close to the camera

**Magazine:** a lightproof metal or plastic container for a roll of film, usually containing both the supply and take-up spools, as well as a pressure plate, for rapid loading without the necessity of threading the film

**Sprocket:** A toothed wheel that engages film perforations in the film stock

**Telecine:** A machine which electronically scans film and converts the visual information into a television signal

**Tundra:** Treeless, grassy plains found in Antarctica and the Arctic

**Tungsten balanced film** Photographic film balanced for the colour of light from a tungsten bulb

**Wratten 85b:** A particular colour (amber) of an optical filter

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