

## **Des and Jen Bartlett: Oral History Transcription**

**Name of interviewees:**

Des and Jen Bartlett

**Name of interviewer:**

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**Name of cameraman:**

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### **1. The early years - first interest in wildlife**

*Int: Can we start right back at the beginning, where were you were both born?*

DB: We were both born in Australia, I was born in Tamborine Mountain up in Queensland, in the rainforest - fantastic.

*Int: and Jen...*

JB: I was born on the outskirts of Sydney.

*Int: And was wildlife an integral part of your lives or was that something you took an interest in later?*

DB: You can go first.

JB: In my case I grew up on the outskirts of Sydney, Australia's biggest city, but I think we had something like seven miles of bushland at our back door and so I grew up with that interest and it has always been there, long before I met Des.

*Int: And at what point did you take an interest in photography, because you are a stills photographer?*

JB: My father was a very keen stills photographer and used to process all his own films so I had a slight interest there as well. But then I had the very best teacher possible in Des, when we got together.

*Int: Des, did you have an interest in cinematography from an early age, or is that something that came much later?*

DB: No, I had an interest in nature. My father was the headmaster, at Tamborine Mountain, up in Queensland, and he had one of the biggest private collections of butterflies from all over the world. And he encouraged the children to do projects on many aspects. So he had timber from all over the world from different countries, minerals from all over the world, as part of the library of books there, so the wildlife side of it was natural right from — [indicated with his hand a small child], right up. And then when I was eleven I got a card in a cereal packet on aeroplanes and that turned me on completely. And I used to collect these things and so on and I started - you remember Flight magazine (1), the big detailed drawings? - I used to draw those double the size, I would peg down smooth sheets of brown paper on one end of the dining room table and double the size and scale of those. And then I started designing my own plane that was called the 'Bartlett Bullet' and I was too young to get in — [to the air force]. I wanted to be a fighter pilot as every young chap would in those days, but I was just too young. I got into the air force in the last few months [of World War 2] and then got kicked out again. So I probably wouldn't be here today if I'd been 5 years older or something like that. So, from that point of view I was very very lucky but there was a complete interest in flying an aeroplane and then I got in [to the air force] down in Melbourne, and we were out in the Number 1 cowshed - you know the big Melbourne show exhibition, where they keep the cattle for the exhibitions and so on - so we were all billeted there, and got to meet up with —. The only place in Australia where they were designing aeroplanes or doing anything that way was Fishermen's Bend [Victoria, Australia] and they had taken the American Harvard big rotary engine fighter and designed the Wirraway, which was the Australian version, and that was the trainer for doing the Tiger Moth-type training. So I got to see them there and showed them my designs and drawings and all that and they really advised me to go to America or England where original designs were being done - but as an 18 year old chap that's too big a move. I read the book 'I Married Adventure' by Osa Johnson (2) and that just turned me on 100% to wildlife filmmaking in the native parts of the world, so I switched over to buying books on editing, on filming, on stills, and started buying stills cameras and went from there on and on —.

## **2. How Des first became involved in the wildlife film industry**

*Int: Can you remember what your first film was?*

DB: I got a job with the Films Division down in Melbourne, which was then called the Department of Information, but it was a laboratory so I was printing and processing films for five years in Melbourne and doing a lot of the English ones from the Crown Film Unit. We'd print those and they'd be sent out and then we had Noel Monkman and his wife Kitty - they'd done a series on the Great Barrier Reef and he was amazing with the microscopic work and did extremely detailed work. In his house he'd have the whole

concrete business up through the floor so that they could mount the microscopes without any vibration. He'd done, for the Films Division, a series on the Great Barrier Reef, and with this microscope-type coverage, so that one particular species, the children wouldn't look anything like their parents, they'd look like their grandparents so that changed that way —. But these films that were handled in the Films Division in printing and processing were then sent over to the places around the world and Armand Denis got to see them in New York and sent out a contract all made out for Noel Monkman, "If you're the man that's made these, you're the man for me." And at that time Noel was negotiating with the Disney people over what he could do but they were trying to cut him down on price every time and he was completely fed up with them. So here was this — [contract], so he completely signed it and sent it off, and I was going to be his assistant on this project all round Australia for a year, or something like that. Unfortunately poor Noel got a gash in his shin with coral and osteomyelitis set in on the bone, and he was a big, strong, German descent chap, and he wouldn't go over to the mainland to hospital. But different doctors would go over to Green Island or from Cairns and pump him full of sulphur drugs when they first came out. And finally one doctor came out, they all told him, "Don't go anywhere near the water, keep it dry," this that and the other. And each doctor that came out probably gave him a different dose of sulphur drugs you know, if that one hadn't worked, this one might. And then finally a doctor came out and he said, "Look, if I had you in hospital I'd have your leg raised, I'd be dripping a saline solution into it. Go into the salt water, it's the best thing you could do." And that cleared it up but then he couldn't wash in soap and water, and Kitty his wife had to sponge him for three months just in a calamine lotion.

Then, he'd [Armand Denis] made a series of films for the Chrysler Corporation in America – Dodge vehicles and so on. Done some in Asia, one was called Wheels Across India (3) then there was another half hour, then he had done some in South America, Wheels Across the Andes (4) and another film, and now this was to be the Australian ones, and already the Dodge Coronet Sedan, the Dodge Power Wagon, big 4 wheel drive with a winch in the front and the three—, five-ton truck were on their way to Australia. So, I resigned from the Films Division and went over to Sydney and cleared the thing, but when I first applied, because of Noel not being able to do it, he wrote to Armand Denis and explained that he couldn't take it on and recommended me for it and had sent on Armand Denis' letter to me in Melbourne from his place in Hawkesbury, near Sydney, and I proposed what I would do and what I would expect salary wise. And it turned out that Armand was down with typhoid fever or something and, what's the hotel - Mount Kenya? Well it doesn't matter much - and I waited and waited expecting a cable at any time and it didn't come and it was ten days before it came and I know that another famous guy in Australia who had done the Arnhem Land aborigine thing with the Geographic and so on, he'd applied for it as well, so I thought, well gee, I'm likely to miss out, but at any rate, finally it came and owing to Monkman's illness, and you know he appointed me so then I went over to Sydney, and he cabled me out some money and that's how it started, in May of 1952.

Armand Denis had made a series of films for RKO, feature films, and one was Below the Sahara (5) and another one was Savage Splendour (6) and RKO wanted to boil everything down as to one super feature from what had been done in the whole of Australia, Noel's work on the Great Barrier Reef, and in New Guinea, work there. Armand and Michaela [Denis] had gone up to Mount Hagen with the dancers and whatnot there and filmed that. And then in 1954 he contacted me to go up and film the Sepik River natives, the ex-head-hunters, and you've got all their initiation ceremony which goes on for three or four months, where they scar all the boys and all around – tremendous thing – and it hadn't been done for seven years, this was the first initiation ceremony.

JB: I think it was 1953, you said 1954, just for the record.

DB: 1953 it is, yes you're right, - getting old. And, so that ended up as a film in the States. Michaela and Armand [Denis] were going over this, and RKO just wanted to do the one super feature, but they both felt it was more than one film. So Ealing studios took it on and they edited it down to three feature films which were released worldwide by J. Arthur Rank, you know the man beating the gong. So, that's how they came out.

Under the Southern Cross (7) was the Australian one. On the Great Barrier Reef (8) was the barrier reef one, that Noel and Kitty Monkman had done, and the other was called Among the Headhunters (9). And the whole first part of that is the Sepik River one, and then it moved over to Mount Hagen. I've brought some stills here I can show you, it will give you an idea. I've made up a black and white photo album then I've just photographed the 24 pages of it on colour negative, so it's a black and white print done on colour. It's a smaller size but it gives one some idea of what it's like.

### **3. Domestic life as wildlife filmmakers**

*Int: Jen, could we just go through the time when you met each other. How did that story develop?*

JB: As near as I can recall it, it would have been 1953 just before you went to New Guinea. A brother of mine had been travelling in central Australia and had met up with Des when he was filming there and so when they all were back in Sydney we all met up and that was the first time we met, and then Des of course went off to New Guinea for five months and I guess we met briefly after he came back. And then it was several more months before we met again. We said that, by the time we got married in 1956, if you'd counted the days on which we'd met prior to that you probably could have counted them on your two hands. So we finally married in London in 1956 when Des had been filming for two years in East Africa for Armand Denis and I'd gone over to England to do other things.

DB: Jen was playing tennis and had got to Wimbledon and so on. I took her away from that.

*Int: The 'other thing' was tennis – you were a tennis player?*

JB: Yes, in the 'shamateur' days as we called it then, professional was a very dirty word – everyone was amateur.

*Int: And you played at Wimbledon?*

JB: Yes, just the one time but it was a lot of fun. And then I switched to carrying cameras instead of tennis rackets. The cameras are a lot heavier - that's the only down side.

*Int: When you were anticipating getting married to Des, did you anticipate the kind of life that you eventually had?*

JB: Well, he kept saying to me, in the couple of weeks we had in London before we were married, he said 'Do you think you are going to like the life?' I had no idea if I'd like the life, I'd done quite a bit of camping with my brothers in Australia and enjoyed the out of doors and hated cities, so that was a good basis.

DB: But in this day and age, of course, you'd go out there unmarried and if it all worked then later you'd probably get married, but in those days you didn't do things like that. So, we got married before we went there and —



*Int: Just thinking of domestic things, when you were out in the bush, how did you split the work between you?*

JB: Well, I didn't know a great deal about photography, when I first went out with Des into the field, but I learnt very quickly, you had to be of any use at all, and it just grew from there.

DB: And even now with packing the vehicle, we'd have two vehicles: a land rover and a big 4-wheel drive Ford. Jen would pack all the food supplies and that side of that and I'd pack camera stuff. The worst thing is someone tries to help and then they put it in a place where you can't find it and you've got a full load of things. So, I'd do what I'd normally do, then if I finished first I'd help Jen or vice versa – if she finished first then she'd help me. That way it worked well, and we'd each know where everything was.

JB: But there is no definite line drawn, "This is your field, that's my field," it's whatever's needed at that time.

*Int: But you eventually became the stills photographer?*

JB: I do most of the stills, yes

*Int: How did that start, is it something that gradually happened?*

JB: Well as Des said, he threw a — well I don't know that it was a 4x5 but it was a large format, yes.

DB: It was a 4x5 Linhof with a roll back and 120 film, but I'd been a stills photographer after the war, and a friend and I opened a photographic studio in Brisbane, in one of the suburbs, and thought up all sorts of ideas, and one was a photographic baby show. So the different category age groups – below six months, six to twelve —.

*Int: When you had your daughter, how did you cope out on the road because up to 14 years she was out with you in the bush, was she not?*

JB: Until she was 12 years old she travelled everywhere with us, we did schooling by correspondence from a Queensland Correspondence School (DB: in Australia) which is a government sponsored education system.

*Int: This was mainly for people who lived in the Outback?*

JB: It's basically for people living in remote areas of Australia.

DB: Or in New Guinea too - in the plantations up there.

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JB: We were still Australian citizens, we still are - non-resident. And they would mail/post her week's work to anywhere in the world and we would send it back for correction. And we arranged that they would send us a few months' work at a time so that we didn't have problems with it catching up with us.

*Int: Where were lessons?*

JB: Wherever we happened to be, sitting in the Land Rover, in a tent, wherever. And it worked extremely well because we could condense a week's work into three half days usually. And it didn't have to be done this week, next week, they didn't mind when the lessons came back, as long as they came back, and it worked extremely well. And she went on later to boarding school in Australia, for high school, near some of our relatives and following on that she did her science degree in the States - biology.

*Int: And what's she doing now?*

JB: She hasn't really used the biology degree, she's done a certain amount of wildlife art and more recently she's just finished a two year course in herbalism and natural healing, so now she's a licensed herbalist in the UK.

*Int: She's living here?*

JB: She's living in the UK.

#### **4. The making of the early films**

*Int: Jen has left us now so we are just with Des Bartlett for the rest of the interview. Des, can we just go back to some of those early films that you made in Australia in the beginning? When you were in those early days, the people that you went to film in those early films, they couldn't have seen people like you with cameras before, how did they react to you?*

DB: Well it became a novelty in a way. In New Guinea I was the only [white] man between the two villages, where there were two patrol officers further up the river. And the Angoram, further down the river, had a few people there. So I was the only white man living on that central section of the Sepik River. I found out later that some of the men would walk in up to 100 miles just to see the white man living in the village, which was quite strange. And also with the Australian aborigines they, before the white man came, they were living quite naturally without any clothing whatsoever. I was able to film that and various things they would do that way. When we were filming [later, in 1976] in Australia, we did one for Survival Anglia called The Wonderful Kangaroo (10) and Malcolm Penny was writing it, and I told him about the half hours for the Chrysler Corporation in America that we had done and that I had colour copies of those, Kodachrome prints, so he wrote over to them and checked - could we be using that, and they said yes if you have the material because they had been supplied with a series of Kodachrome prints and, of course, projecting time and time again they soon crack up and scratch and so on and so they didn't have any and so they said yes - you're welcome to use them as long as you have the thing and he referred to it as this 'rare archival footage of the Australian aborigines', we did a hunting sequence that we used in the kangaroo film. Most of them couldn't care less about taking their clothes off although they might have been wearing them. And one sequence I remember

clearly, any of the men that didn't want to take their trousers off, I had them in long grass just showing their top part with a spear over their shoulder, and then Armand [Denis] carrying - I had a 35 Arriflex, but not with film in it - he was carrying that and then the younger — at the end with all the boys going along on this kangaroo hunt, so you can get around it that way. And then in the film it shows perfectly they were all naked, as they were in the past, but in fact they weren't – the ones with trousers on were hidden in the long grass. And when I'd been there for a while, the girls and so on, unmarried girls, they got used to me completely, and I'd seen them in the river, they take the water hyacinth flowers, and later I did scenes with Michaela [Denis] there as well, and one of them swims back across underwater, holding the bunch of flowers up and so on, and it all fits together so well, and they'd climb a tree and jump in, completely, actually in the nude. With a dark skinned person it doesn't show as nudity, a white person it would show as terrible nudity, but with a dark person it doesn't. And they're so athletically built, the hunters and so on.

*Int: They accepted the camera?*

DB: Yes - no problem whatsoever that way.

*Int: And how did you travel on the Sepik River?*

DB: Well, there was a trader at Madang who would go up the Sepik every so often with supplies which he'd sell and then he'd bring other things out. So he was taking me up to the river and he turned up the side river to a village called Aibon, a-i-b-o-n, where they make the best pots and so on. And when we were there he'd heard that there was an initiation ceremony going on on the main river, and with his help I bought a 62ft 6 dug out canoe, one log, and the canoe was so wide you could put a 44 gallon drum of fuel in it and you still had to chock it, and hired ten paddlers with the very long paddles and on the other end they have a spike so if it's on vegetation they push against that to get it through the reeds and so on. He was going to go back to Madang from there, so, very difficult to understand some of the Pidgin English with the native people speaking, I could understand a white person saying it, but with the others, a deeper voice and this, that and the other, so it took me a while to get it, but managed.

We travelled from four in the afternoon right through the night until about four the next day when we arrived and there was over a thousand men joining a sing-sing through the village, and I thought, well I better not show any fear or anything like that and just act as if I own the place and take photos and so on. And with flashlight during the night, and at dawn they started bringing in canoes and the Haus Tamberan, is the men's ceremonial house, it's a giant thing, beautifully made, without a single nail, and they had screened that off with banis palm leaves so the women and children wouldn't see the initiation ceremony, and they put these upturned canoes around the edge of the banis. Then it's the maternal uncle that holds the boy on the canoe while they do all the scarification and it takes over an hour. And when they were preparing that, two old men, lulawais, started jabbering away to me in their native language and one of the chaps interpreted and I thought, geewhizz, I've come all this way, done all this filming and doing the photographing during the night and now I can't film the main thing. But what it was, they were trying to explain to me the significance of this. The boys grow up, so all the blood is their mother's blood, and now the men do this scarification, it lets out their mother's blood and then they feed them just certain foods for this three to four month period of the initiation, and they teach them to fight and take pain without whimpering, during that period, and it's an incredible initiation ceremony. They used to, in the old days, plant a banana sucker and when that bore fruit that would be the end of the initiation ceremony, so you know how long that would have gone on for. So, they were explaining to me about this letting out the blood and all that, so I was just welcomed in and they were pleased to have it covered I think.

*Int: Where would those films have been shown?*

DB: Well, they were edited by Ealing Studios, in London, and released worldwide by J. Arthur Rank in the cinemas, and they were combined with a Norman Wisdom film. Well we'd never heard of Norman Wisdom out in Australia and it taught me one lesson about the cinema. There were two features always in those days. The main feature always gets 75% of the box, or the gross, and the second feature only gets 25%. So in Australia a lot of the people were going to see the second film, the film made in Australia and yet three quarters of it went to the other film, it was an interesting insight into film in those early days.

## **5. Working with Armand Denis**

*Int: Okay, let's catch up now with where we were a little while ago. You had joined up with Armand Denis, making films in Africa?*

DB: Yes – did the central Australia-style, and cutting shots on the Great Barrier Reef and Green Island and then up in New Guinea. And then in 1954 he sent —. Ah, I need to explain a little bit with that. This was before the BBC or anyone got started into wildlife films, and he'd made two previous feature films for RKO. One was called *Below the Sahara* (6), and the other one was *Savage Splendour* (7). They were in colour shot in 16 mm film, shot on a Kodak Filmo camera that you wind up and it runs for 15 feet and then you have to wind it up again. So that had gone down extremely well, and while he was working on the editing with Ealing Studios he was showing —. The BBC wanted to show certain things so he'd show extracts of these films and they were popular, very popular, and they'd want more, so he showed them a bit more and they became even more popular. And finally the BBC were wanting more and more and he said, look it's not a bottomless well that I can just keep pulling film out of, but we could go to Africa and make a series for you there. So he made a deal with the BBC to make six half hour films and he contacted me to fly over and meet him in Nairobi in June of 1954 and, for six months, join him for six months in Africa to make these six half hour films for the BBC. So we did most of those up on the Northern Frontier [District] of Kenya and also down in Voi. That was my first view of elephants and working with elephants. And I think it's interesting, that I noticed one afternoon out at Aruba Dam [in Tsavo National Park] there was one young elephant that wasn't there with a herd and none of the herds would accept it, and when I went back next morning there was this baby elephant still around and, David Sheldrick was the warden, and we went in and fixed up the power wagon to bring it back into the headquarters and filmed this sequence in late 1954, and that was the start of the Tsavo animal orphanage. And that was Samson the first one, and he was finally raised beautifully and went on his way, and then a year later or so I filmed with Armand and Michaela there with a little female who'd been brought in, with the two of them having mud baths and going out with the rangers into the field, being looked after all day long, and that was the start of the Tsavo animal orphanage and it's grown so much, world famous now. And many of these things happen over the period of time.

And also in our business up there we visited Joy & George Adamson in Isiolo and they'd told us about a man eater [lion] further up that had to be shot, or tried to be tracked down and shot. George himself was too busy to go, so an assistant went, and we went with him to try and film all this. We were sleeping on the ground in the open, rather stupidly - at the time when you're looking for a man eater and you can catch up with it, to sleep outside the vehicles on the ground with no cover and no tents, or anything. But anyway we got away with it, it went well. Another visit up there, George Adamson had been called out on a similar thing, and he shot this lioness, and then he found she was a nursing mother, which he didn't know about and no-one had told him or anything and so he hunted around and found three young cubs, and they were all female, and one of those later became known as Elsa. So they grew up and we filmed them in those early days, the three cubs, and they sent two over to England to zoos and kept the one which is Elsa, and we filmed her under all manner of conditions. And at that time Jen was pregnant and she thought she'd like to have it back in Sydney where her parents were living and Joy and George wanted us to go up and live at Isiolo in their



house, because they had a boy who looked after Elsa, but they thought if they had someone who Elsa also knew to be part of the family, then she wouldn't be lonely when the others were away for a month at the coast on their holiday. But with flying in those days you couldn't fly after a certain point, so we couldn't do it. So that's when they took Elsa to the coast and she swam out into the sea and all those wonderful things. If we'd been able to stay in Isiolo they wouldn't have learnt that about Elsa - that they swim in the sea and so on. Everyone thought lions hated water and would never go into water.

## **6. Archives and equipment (and details of how Des and Jen met)**

*Int: What happened to that material that you shot, was that made into a film?*

DB: Yes - that was the whole series for the BBC. I'd like to now meet up with a librarian and see what titles they have listed for those early days.

*Int: So those early days would have been kept in the BBC archive?*

DB: I honestly don't know. We've got 16 mm prints so I'm trying to get that all together now. I've transferred many of the colour ones over to master video and making VHS prints of that. I want to start to put that together. Jen and I plan to do one now - our first 50 years of wildlife filmmaking. Get a bit further down the road and we'll start on the second 50 years!

*Int: Those first six films that you mentioned earlier, what title did they go out on?*

DB: Filming in Africa? And shown in black and white, of course.

*Int: They were shown in black and white?*

DB: *Shown* in black and white, shot on colour, on Kodachrome. Kodachrome 1 in those days it only had a speed of 6 ASA. Noel Monkman had used Pathé Webo cameras, 16 mm, just a hundred footer, because it had a glass set at 45 degrees, which, very thin, would reflect about 5-10% of the light out through the viewfinder. So, you could focus visually as a reflex but most of the light would go through that clear glass onto the film. I'd bought two of these for this central Australian trip, and so on so. And I also had one Bell and Howell Filmo that you wind up, and the Pathé you wind up, but it would do 40 feet on one —, no I'm sorry - it's the Kodak I've got since - the Kodak K100 winds 40 feet and I used it quite a bit to run in and get close up scenes from different angles, where you leave your main camera on a tripod and that worked extremely well. But all those early films were done on just this little mini Pathé Webo camera, 100ft rolls of Kodachrome. And that's really how Jen and I met up in that we'd been camped on the campground in Cairns and going over to Green Island to film Armand and Michaela and with Noel & Kitty Monkman for the cut-in shots for that, and then we drove across the base of Cape York and up the west side of Cape York, and then Armand and Michaela flew back to edit these two half hour films for the Chrysler Corporation, and one was called *Wheels Across [Australia]* (11), the other one was *Land of the Kangaroo* (12). Then the material was used in this feature film: *Under the Southern Cross* (8) was one of the J. Arthur Rank films that he released, and the other one was *On the Great Barrier Reef* (3), and the other one, *Among the Head-hunters* (9).

*Int: Those released by Rank, do they still exist?*

DB: Yes they still exist but evidently both those firms have been out of business – sold out - and Carol O’Callaghan tracked it down for - he chased it round on our behalf, and there’s been about two or three different other takeovers in that period and now Canal + France own the material and so on. So we’re chasing that up to get it back. But it will cost me a lot of money to show my own film because of this business. I was following on, so Armand and Michaela flew off from Normanton, back to Sydney and then over to —. They had a few pets as well, from —, a small sulphur crested cockatoo, a green mountain parrot and a little wallaby, so they went to Cuba and they edited the films in Cuba before —. You know this would have been 1953 actually and then I carried on up to Darwin and down to Adelaide and all around. And while in central Australia in Alice Springs, I’d run out of Kodachrome, 100 foot or so, and you buy Kodachrome, or you did in those days, through a chemist shop. They stocked it as they still do with film now. So I went into this chemist shop and I asked for six rolls of Kodachrome, which was quite a lot of money in those days, about £30 or short of that. And this lady, very nice lady, gave me too much change. And it turned out to be her first day working there and thought all she’d have to do is make up milkshakes, so instead of getting just a few shillings, she got £30 or so in this first day and she gave me back too much money in change, so I gave it back to her. She was very embarrassed. But then next time in she’d hear how we’d gone out and visited this place or that place in central Australia and wanted me to meet her husband, which is Pat Edmondson, Jen’s brother. And, I was going to be back in Sydney before they were, so they gave us the address of both their families to visit them both and that’s where we met up.

*Int: Over a roll of film?*

DB: Yes - over six rolls of Kodachrome film. And now I’ve taken over two million feet of 16 mm Kodak film, so I want to contact Kodak in the States and let them know and see if they are interested in it at all. And the other interesting thing is: I did all the book work. So from when I left Melbourne in 1952 in May, I can tell you every day where I’ve been and between here and there and all the expenses for the different categories.

*Int: You’ve kept all that?*

DB: Yes - and then also with the film I’d make detailed notes as I filmed it and number it. That’s how I know I’ve shot over two million feet – because I’ve got a record of it all. They used to use big account books and I’d fit three rows of printing onto the one line. And then more recently of course I’d write the long hand and type it up. I’ve got those records so I can look up to find when was the day we filmed Samson being caught at Tsavo, things like that. I haven’t done it yet, you’ve got to have a purpose for it, or a need for it, but I plan to do it before too long.

## **7. Working with Armand and Michaela Denis on On Safari (13)**

*Int: Des, carrying on the Africa story, you made the first six films there. What happened after that?*

DB: Well, he’d asked me to go for six months so that was —. So those six months stretched to 10 years in Africa. Armand and Michaela [Denis] would fly over to England, the BBC, and they would edit those and he’d write the narration. That was with Desmond Hawkins way back in those days. I used to know so much about Desmond Hawkins having heard Armand talking about him and so on, and yet we had never met up. Because we stayed in Africa filming the whole time and they’d come over and show them on the BBC, and

he took the series of Safari to Asia as well - 12 films in that series (14). So they'd be away for eleven months at one time, all that sort of thing. I'd be filming new subjects in Africa and when they'd come out I'd do cut-in shots to fit them into those films.

*Int: And those films were called what?*

DB: *On Safari (13)*.

*Int: That was On Safari (13)?*

DB: The general title was *On Safari (13)* and there was a total of 105 of those, including the ones in Asia.

*Int: How did you go about them? How did you organise that?*

DB: Well, Armand [Denis] was building a two storey house at Langata after —. Michaela [Denis] acted as a double for Deborah Kerr in [King Solomon's Mines] a Hollywood feature, and Armand was the technical adviser on it. They'd started building this house and Armand had drawn all the plans of what he wanted and so on, and that's when they left to come out to Australia. So it was interesting when we met up in Kenya and stayed in the New Stanley Hotel when I first went over there. We'd drive around and the people out in the —. Armand would say, "Excuse me, but can you help me find my house?" It was so funny because he wasn't exactly sure of where it was.

There are so many funny stories and now transferring them over to master video and seeing them for the —. Jen and I have never seen one of those films on television because we're out making new ones all the time, and some we have got Kodachrome prints of. We're getting to see it for the first time 40 years after it was taken, it's quite something. The one thing I find is so nice is Armand and Michaela spoke the part and so on. Armand would write it and write parts for Michaela and they used to argue a bit. Michaela was saying with the fan mail she should have more parts and so on but it was a happy relationship.

It's wonderful, we're like family and here —. Armand had passed away with Parkinson's disease in the early 1970s and here, now, the voice is just as good as ever, just as if we are talking. That's a strange experience, a wonderful experience, that film can carry on that thing. It's intimate, it's personal, a bit like you're doing these archival things.

*Int: How did you decide what to shoot?*

DB: I'm the lucky one on all that I think. I just film what interests me.

*Int: In those days, just going back to On Safari (13), how did you decide? You would go out into the field?*

DB: Yes, like in Voi in Tsavo, I'd film what I'd found and anything else there.

*Int: So you filmed whatever moved basically?*

DB: More or less, yes. And then when we went up in the northern frontier district it was different native villages and so on. One is called the Wells of Boona (15), did you see that on that tape? It was about a six or seven man well. They dug right down and then they hand up their buckets to the top and they water the sheep and the camels, even the cows. But it's all brought up by hand from underground. In that one Armand [Denis] remarks that he thought there was something a little different in the man at the top, that he'd feel down and they would hand it up and they're all singing and carrying on. It turned out this man was totally blind. He could do that and act normally as a workman, bringing up the water to feed the cattle and that had to go on every day.

We'd filmed the cattle and sheep and goats going through rugged things, mountain and all manner of places, and we went to Wajir and did a lot of work there with the camels and so on. One interesting sequence is just called Manyatta, a Borani village up in the Northern Frontier of Kenya. A girl of about 14 had been mauled by a lion. She was out protecting her animals and a lion attacked and killed a young camel, and she just took up with a little stick she had in her hand and attacked this lion. It mauled her badly and her shouts and screams brought them in and they speared it. As Armand says in the film, the local people didn't think it was unusual for a girl of that tender age attacking the lion that was killing her charges.

She was having her hair done by an older sister when we filmed her and she was a little bit sullen to start with, couldn't understand what was going on with all this and so on. But that led into the story of this village and later with the drought they had to move, and they had camels and big bulls and bullocks and sheep and so on, to the Tana River. It's an amazing thing in that all their possessions get moved on their beasts of burden. So there's the camel being led by a little girl that's probably six through the bush, through this dry savannah, and on top of that is all their building material. Their huts meet at the top and then they put skins over them. So that's all packed up to be moved to the river when they move. Up on top of the camel, which is a very tall animal as you know, are these sticks, curved sticks of their buildings and then they rebuild it wherever they stop.

Also when they get to this water, it's chocolate coloured water flowing very fast in the Tana River. All the animals are lined up drinking but some of the sheep just swim out into the water and do a loop back to shore again. Armand remarked, "How many people have seen a sheep swimming just for the fun of it?" They'd never seen water like that before.

So it's a rather unique period of thing done in late 1954 and I believe now it's not really safe to go into some of these areas. There's all AK27s and this, that and the other. Somalis coming down, raiding. Poor George Adamson got killed, with his lions, protecting them and so on. Things change.

So we're launching into a film now on our first 50 years of wildlife filmmaking and we want to go back 40, 45, 50 years later to some of these places, and show the changes that have been made. One of the films was Operation Noah (16) with Rupert Fothergill and Tinkey Haslam, Kariba Dam as it rose, and rescuing the animals. We got to see this for the first time recently and I'd forgotten that the press and everything was asking ladies from all over the world to send their used nylon stockings. You see the men plaiting these to a rope to tie the animal's legs together as it doesn't chafe like a hard rope would do, and I'd forgotten that. Simple little thing, but there it is on film. Now that has become the best national park in Zimbabwe. So to go back 45, 46, 47 years after it and show the park and how it's progressed, and how it all —, is a positive approach to it. So that type of thing we're hoping to do in the future.

## **8. Working for Survival**

*Int: Can we go on next to the next stage in your life after On Safari (13) and working with Armand Denis. What was the next stage?*

DB: Well, the next stage was we'd made about 70 half hours in Africa, I'd shot in Africa. Then Armand had made this deal with the BBC to do a series in North America. So in June of 1964 he asked Jen and I and Julie to go over to the States with him and film in the States, which we did. Also we went down to Suriname in South America and did the Brokopondo Dam which is similar to Operation Noah, with rescuing the animals that were being flooded in the Brokopondo area of Suriname. That hasn't reached the light of day yet, so I think it's probably still in Kenya, the original with —. Michaela [Denis]'s still alive; she's 86. So we're trying to bring all these ends together.

*Int: Was that one of the first times to film pregnant seahorses? Was that in that group of films?*

DB: Yes. Has that been shown on the BBC?

*Int: I don't know.*

DB: I'm not sure. We have a base out of Tucson and I picked up a lot of correspondence around the mid 1960s, and reading letters from Michaela or Armand [Denis], back in —. He developed, unfortunately, Parkinson's disease and while we were based in the Miami area he was getting treatment for that, and then finally he decided to go back to Kenya. That's when I was negotiating, by correspondence, with the BBC and Survival, and ended up filming for Survival.

*Int: Well, let's go back to Survival then. When you stopped, when Armand and Michaela Denis retired from wildlife filmmaking, you then were approached by Survival to work with them, is that right?*

DB: Well, actually Colin Willock had gone out to Africa and met up with us at the Entebbe tower. They have a platform every 20 feet up through the rainforest and they have automatic machines that would suck mosquitoes in into the jar every half hour through the night. They found that certain mosquitoes only operated 20 feet above the ground. One of those, the wriggler, was a predatory animal that only ate other mosquito lava. So if you could have those at ground level to eat the malaria *Anopheles* mosquito it would have been terrific. But they only would lay their eggs in water 20 feet above the ground, caught in a knot in the tree.

But we were there and Julie was a little girl, and Colin and Joan Willock came out to do a series, a visit there, and looked us up. He tried to talk to me into joining Survival then and I said, "I can't, I'm with Armand and Michaela Denis." The other interesting thing is, we made the story in Australia on the insects, the spiders and the monarch butterfly and the bulldog ant when Julie was being born. So that was done in 1957 and that's four years before Survival started in 1961. We thought, well, that's one that perhaps Jen and I will present to the BBC, see if they're interested and start us off on our own.



When we got back to Kenya, Armand really wanted us to carry on with them and he'd organised two films with — there, and another series of Animaland (17) with Bob Tobias and it grew and grew and grew. We made a total of 104 of those, little short four or five minute films, where the animals interact. It's like a living cartoon and voices are put to animals or birds. Aubrey Buxton came out to Kenya another time and saw some of these at our place at Langata. He liked them so much he thought, well, he should take some back to his colleagues in London and see what they thought. They I think bought some of them for Survival in those early days, but otherwise they haven't been seen at all [outside North America].

*Int: What was the first film for Survival then, can you remember? Was that the one shot on Pelican Island?*

DB: Yes, you're exactly right. We were down in the Miami area. This is the first national park or wildlife refuge in America and it was Teddy Roosevelt that had set it up. So we made a film on that, half hour film on Pelican Island with all the different bird species that were nesting there and everything else.

*Int: That was called Monuments in the Mangroves (18)?*

DB: That's correct, yes. That's good background research you've done.

*Int: What came next? What sorts of films were you making?*

DB: Well, we went over to the Wichita Mountains in Kansas.

*Int: The Wichita Mountain Refuge?*

DB: Yes, and did the bison there and prairie dogs and what not, and then carried on up through to Yellowstone and round and down to the west coast of the States.

*Int: So the Yellowstone film was called Wilderness at Bay (19)?*

DB: Yes, that's right.

*Int: How different was that moving from —.*

DB: Well, I think that was done a bit later.

*Int: Was that later?*

DB: We'd done some filming there but later we went back there and spent two years living in Jackson Hole and filmed there.



# WILDFILMHISTORY

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*Int: Filming elk?*

DB: Elk and one we made at the national elk refuge, in winter, and that's before Jackson Hole, the wildlife festival, started, years before any of that. I did a lot of the beaver filming in clear pools round the Jackson Hole area.

*Int: The beaver film (20) was one of the first big specials, wasn't it, for Survival?*

DB: One hour one, yes.

*Int: I think that was the second.*

DB: Yes. Alan Root and Aubrey Buxton had lined it up to do the Galapagos and had Prince Philip do the narration. He'd been out there and loved it. That was, I think, one of the first that Survival sold in America, and then the World of the Beaver (20) one came in much more detail.

*Int: And that was made in the Teton Mountains?*

DB: Well, it was made everywhere from the White Mountains of Arizona to Alaska. The different aspects were made there but a lot of the detailed stuff was done in the Jackson Hole area with the Tetons and the storms forming over the Tetons, the lighting and everything else.

*Int: Now by that time had the kind of equipment that you were using changed?*

DB: Yes. In Kenya in 1954 the chemist shop there, Mr Robson owned it, and he was the Arriflex agent. I saw my first standard Arriflex in September of 1954. So an Arriflex is an Arriflex with the divergent turrets. The early lenses were —, Kilfitt lenses on the bigger ones and a Sombertliot zoom from 25 to 100 mm, so it's a one inch to four inch lens, and that was with a lever underneath. So I'd have that on the turret plus a 150 Kilfitt, a six inch lens and the 300 Kilfitt. The 300 Kilfitt was so wonderful with the Arriflex focusing it brings everything in close. For the northern frontier filming it was amazingly good.

Then down in South Africa, I went down there and bought a car and started filming there. One of the first was Rondevlei with the cattle egrets nesting there and I got the birth of the cattle egret and all manner of things, and then later filmed Armand and Michaela [Denis] wading through that place for the cut-in shots.

*Int: But everybody thought, of course, at home that Armand and Michaela [Denis] were there all the time. They weren't in fact.*

DB: Yes, and [it appeared as if] Armand [Denis] was filming everything. I've been happy to let it go because the fun thing is to be in the field with the wildlife. We could go anywhere, stay anywhere and so many of the poor film people more recently they're out of work for six months of the year. They have to put a proposal in



and get it accepted and all that. In the meantime they're using up all the money just having to live. Most of them, of course, have children at school, either in England or America and so on and they can't go out for a very long period. I know Gil Grosvenor, Head of the National Geographic, told us the maximum he can ever get any photographer to go out in the field is three months, even two months is a long time. So he appreciated what we were doing by living in the field with the wildlife all the time. You can do much more in-depth coverage that way and I think that's caught on more and more now. By Julie doing correspondence from Australia, it made it perfect.

### **9. Flight of the Snow Geese (21)**

*Int: And it worked. Can we talk about Flight of the Snow Goose (21) you mentioned just now which is a film which made a big splash? Can you tell us the story of how that came about and how you shot it?*

DB: Yes. We were talking about Yellowstone, filming in that area, then going over to the West, Sacramento Valley in California, and further up in Oregon. I filmed some of the waterfowl there, including the snow geese. We had a lot of good coverage on that, back with Colin Willock at Survival, and we decided to do a film on the geese, on the snow goose. But the ones over there would nest on Wrangel Island in Russia so there was no way of being able to follow those to the breeding grounds. So we studied it up and decided that the central flyway was the perfect place to do it. At Queen's University [mistake - meant University of Western Ontario] in Canada they had a scientific team studying them on the west side of Hudson Bay.

*Int: That's the McConnell River?*

DB: McConnell River, yes. So organised to join them.

*Int: That was led by Charlie MacInnes?*

DB: MacInnes, yes. He was an incredible man with knowledge of birdsongs and all that. You'd ask him about some and he'd mimic the tune, and everything else. I could never do that type of thing but he had a photographic memory too. You'd talk about an aeroplane and he'd tell you what engine it was and this, that and the other. It was quite amazing.

*Int: Now you did something on that film which was pioneering and that's habituating animals to film them. Could you explain about how you went on there?*

DB: Yes. We had to, naturally, get permission from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian to do anything of this type. But Charlie had told us how, if all the chicks are supposed to hatch at the same time, stay in the nest until they're all dry, and then the female the next morning will take them off, and often one is lagging behind. It's left either as an egg or as a newly born chick in the nest while the others take off. So he suggested that if I got a permit for them I could perhaps pick up some of these stray left-behind things and save their lives. So we got a permit to do that and have them with us, and then you can get the close-ups as they develop at all stages. It worked extremely well.



We tried various things to get close-ups of geese flying, including hiring the chap in America that was the champion on a little model plane, radio controlled plane and so on. It was fine, we mounted a little 50 footer Kodak magazine camera to shoot through the propeller. When we started it on a big refuge where there's thousand of geese feeding, when the engine started the geese would look up, all round, didn't move - it didn't worry them. But once that lifted into the air it was a bird of prey.

We made the snow goose film as a one hour film but there were six other half hours done at the same time because you've got all this long [day]light up there, and you never know if you'll ever get back so you do the detailed filming of all the nesting species which is fantastic. But on the way up through the States we filmed with this model plane and Colin [Willock] used the footage in one of the half hour films, and he refers to it as an aerial combat film because the geese do evasive action to escape this bird of prey which was the model plane. Then in landing the plane it tipped over on its nose at one stage and that's all filmed. It made an interesting sequence but not good enough to go into the special.

*Int: You also filmed habituated birds flying behind vehicles. That was the first time wasn't it?*

DB: Well, the point is that with the geese you've got to get them flying which they do naturally, of course. You run along with them and they take off and they would go further and further but they'd always come back again on the flat tundra. They'd disappear over the horizon but they always knew where they'd taken off from and could find it back again. That was a big eye opener to us. We had a very good friend in the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, a top guy, and he talked over with all the biologists and they were concerned that once we had these flying geese they'd be in new areas where they hadn't flown to with their parents. Then they'd never be able to find their way back again. So that was a warning that to keep them flying you have to do it each day.

We'd book into a motel. We had a trailer, built up a trailer, to carry them back from Canada and you'd book into a motel and you'd say, "Do you have accommodation?" There were four of us at the time. Les [Bartlett] and Lee Lyon were with us and then they said, "Yes". "Well, would you mind us having some tame geese here?" We set up a little thing for them to bath and so on. It became quite an attraction rather than a deterrent for people. It's a bit like having babies or cats or dogs. Their interests come first. You've got to get them settled down before you think of yourself and having food and so on. It worked so well.

We were coming through where the hunting areas were and it was quite a worry. One refuge, people aren't allowed to fire a firearm within a village or town so that worked fairly well. But with the geese flying so far and the hunting season on, it became a bit of a worry and we lost a few of them in one of the refuges. They flew outside the refuge area and back again. One was missing and we called him Clark Gable because he'd always be in front of the camera, walking up into the trailer or this, that and the other. And he was one of the ones that didn't appear. Then finally one of the refuge people saw a goose that didn't move in one area so we went and it was Clark Gable, and he became the tamest of all and didn't want to leave us out of his sight and so on. But he'd boss all the others that would be walking up the ramp and he'd peck at them not to come into the trailer. He was the boss, but it was quite fascinating.

We never expected to lose the geese once they were flightless and that's the time when they did go back to the wild. It's rather amazing. We went back a second season to the Arctic and this time we worked at Cape Churchill, and there were grizzly bears around and that type of thing. We were sleeping in tents and had a dozen snow geese in the front part of the Low and Bonar tent from Kenya, that we had taken over, and we were in the back part. Jen woke up at night and heard this scraping of a polar bear against the tent, inside the guy ropes and so on. We were sleeping on the ground and you look up and see this big shadow just a foot from your head, it's quite an experience.



So all you can do is shout as loud as you can, "Get out!" type thing, and fortunately this bear did go away but you don't know when it's going to be coming back again. It had smelt the geese and we didn't have a firearm, we didn't have an axe or anything big like that to try and frighten it off. It was quite funny.

We sleep with sheets inside the sleeping bag and take everything off at night. So you wake up with a polar bear there and you think, well, I decided I must put my clothes on. What help it would be to have your clothes on if the polar bear came back, I don't know. We compared notes later that one of us got cold and the other one got the other way - hot, too hot. A cold sweat I suppose. So we each reacted slightly differently and fortunately the polar bear didn't come back.

Then later some of the —, from Cooke [mistake - meant Queen's] University, they gave us some thunder flashes and Les [Bartlett] used it on one bear, one time. Then he felt so ashamed, the bear ran off flat out and it wasn't a fully grown one, and he felt it was doing too much to throw a thunder flash at the bear because he got such a shock, poor thing. But it meant he didn't come in and get the geese, which was a big help.

*Int: On one of those shoots there was a curious sandhill crane?*

DB: That's right. It started out being called Red because they're a red colour, and then it changed to Fred, and just a fascinating thing. Charlie MacInnes really wanted us to raise it. He had found it out and so on and it was Miracle dog food that they all grew up on, and the crane used to love that as well.

Also one of the smaller Canada geese, the smaller size and so on, and Colin [Willock] wanted those other species kept out of it, it should be just the snow geese because that was the film about them. And some of the things Fred the crane did were so unique I felt I had to film it. So Les [Bartlett] had left his shoes and socks at the side of the lake at Sand Lake Refuge, and Fred came out for a swim. The geese would swim out. Jen and Les would paddle the canoe out and they'd swim along behind, and somehow we had to try and keep Fred from it. So Fred and the little Canada goose were kept in their pen sort of thing and they resented that. When you'd let them out they wouldn't look at you eye to eye, look away. We'd insulted them by not including them in the swimming party. It was quite strange.

With Fred he'd swim out too when we were just doing that and the geese would take off and he could take off from water and fly too, a sandhill crane. I don't think that's ever seen before. But Colin didn't want to use it at that stage and finally so much good material came up that he did, and Fred became a star in the snow goose film. But instead of using Les's sock that he'd taken off we used to put a little towel down and that's where he dried himself off after swimming.

*Int: With the towel?*

DB: With the towel, a little towel. He'd drop it and pick it up and then do his back, incredible. We've never had a full explanation of it by any scientist but it's an interesting thing.

*Int: And that's all on film?*





DB: Yes. But the one thing about the snow goose that everyone seems to remember is at the border we'd had this trailer, taking them back down to the Gulf of California [mistake - meant Gulf of Mexico]. The one guy on the customs post said, "The geese must have some value, they're being used in a film." And I said, "Well you can't own migratory water fowl, they belong to Uncle Sam." He was still trying to find a place and then finally the veterinarian came and it's for scientific purposes so that was cleared. He thought I was pulling his leg when I sat and told him we could have let them go on the Canadian side, driven over and then they would have joined us over there. He thought it was a load of bullshit, to put it bluntly I think, or goose shit or whatever.

But anyway at the end of it when we were cleared I said to him would you like to see them fly, and of course they all did. They wanted to see it. So we put the ladder and then the geese came down, gathered around for a while and then they took off as shown in the film. But the strange thing, even for us, was that they took off into Canada, disappeared out of sight, they were gone. There were clouds in sky, no sign of the geese. They said, "Well, will they come back?" We said, "Well, they usually do, we hope so." That's when they came back and landed with us.

The chaps in the customs asked us for photographs of it and they published it in their magazine, this unique experience of having these snow goose at the border. They wanted our autographs after all that but it was quite strange. But people remember that more than just straight wildlife footage of geese and what they do.

*Int: Now that film was a very successful film.*

DB: It would seem like it, yes. It's still being shown. We got the Emmy for the cinematography, Jen and I, and Les Parry had got the Emmy for editing which was great because he'd worked so hard on it, had extra time, and he would get in close-ups where it was needed, and those things. He and Sheila [Parry] were with us at New York, and Aubrey Buxton was over there for the Emmy ceremony, and the cinematography one came up first. We got it and then poor Les is sitting there, trembling, waiting for the editing award. So we were so pleased that he got it. It was a wonderful thing. It meant so much to him.

*Int: Have you won many awards since?*

DB: Yes, some. Strangely enough we got another Emmy for the one we did for the Geographic, Survivors of the Skeleton Coast (22). It turned out to be for the sound effects and once before the Jouberts had filmed in Botswana, and one of their Emmys was for director of the film, for director in a wildlife film. How do you direct a wildlife film? I thought, well, this is strange, strange, strange. Then by getting this other, I realised that if a film is way up there, and it's popular, they will only give out one cinematography award. But if it deserves more than that they'll put it into one of these other categories. And if it's very good sound, then they will say, "Well, let's give an Emmy for the sound effects." Or with the Jouberts it must have been —. They gave a director's credit for a wildlife film. We didn't understand at the time but now I can visualise it a little more.

## **10. Move to Namibia**

*Int: At what stage did you decide to move to Namibia?*





DB: Well, we'd made a contract with Survival to do a one hour film on lions, one hour film on waterholes, a half hour film on zebra, a half hour film on weaver birds, and we'd never been to South West Africa before. We'd been down to Kruger and South Africa quite a lot and all the various national parks between. So we decided to go there and see it. But we'd also got permission from the South African Parks Board to film in the Kalahari games park and also in Kruger national park. I thought, well, we can do some on lions in Kruger, some on lions in the Kalahari, some in Etosha, and show all the variety of lion behaviour.

But then when you get into it and you start doing it you realise it's important to stick to the one area and show more detail coverage. So we stayed in Etosha and did a whole series of films in Etosha. At that stage Etosha was closed for the wet season, from the end of October to the second Friday of March. So there were no tourists at all and that's when the all the animals had their young, and the staff would go away for their holidays or to relieve up the coast and get some cool weather. The park was very few people and the filming was excellent during that period, and we could do things then that we can't do now.

*Int: In Etosha you started to use microlights, small aircraft. Was that in Etosha?*

DB: No. I wish we had during the lion filming in places. You could be up at first light and see where they were and go out in the vehicles or be on radio. No, it was in the Skeleton Coast.

*Int: So that was later?*

DB: Yes. We went down there in 1984.

*Int: So tell me about how that story developed.*

DB: Well, we'd done a recce with Colin and Joan Willock at one time to various parts of Namibia, including up near the Kraprivi strip and so on. Interesting places but the desert when we went there we got to see a few elephants living amongst the sand, and there were up to a dozen lions living there as well. So we thought this would make a far more unique film than any of the other areas, and we'd done so many in Etosha, I think it's 13 or 15 films total. Lived in Etosha for six years and did a lot of National Geographic stories for the magazine as well.

So we thought, well, for a special it usually takes one year, occasionally two years like the snow goose but you come up with half hours as well. So we thought we'd do it in that time and then Colin [Willock] wrote at one stage. He'd looked at the material and he couldn't see the story developing because you're concentrated on one aspect, what's happening at that particular time of the year and the best. You try and get that thoroughly because you may never see those conditions again.

So he made the suggestion, did I want to buy it back from Survival, what they'd advanced and the costs of the film and all the expenses to that stage and we decided, yes. We showed some of the stills to the Geographic crowd and they were going to be paying us twice as much as Survival for the finished film. Then it turned out that they sat on the fence for so long without advancing this or doing this, that and the other. So we decided, well, we'll go the whole route and do it all on our own, even to the editing and finishing stage. Then we ended up with a series of five films, apart from the National Geographic special.

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We did an article for the Geographic [National Geographic Magazine] on the Skeleton Coast. That was after eight years of solid work in that area and it turned out to be one of the most popular programmes [articles] for the year which came out I think, 12<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> most popular programme [article]. They said for a wildlife programme [article] this is phenomenal and then they wanted it as a TV special. At that stage we hadn't thought of showing it to anyone. We went to Norwich twice to meet up with Nick Noxon who came over from Los Angeles and we finally put a deal together then for a proper one hour film, where they could see the light of day and were willing to pay a little bit more for it.

So it went through as a special there but we hadn't got what we thought was enough variety and everything we wanted. So we carried on for [a total of] 11 years filming in the desert and did our series of five films, one hour films on the desert. But with that area we'd heard about this little helicopter over near Tucson up in Phoenix that looked almost like a Jet Ranger but a smaller size, and you can build it [your] self and learn to fly and all that. But it would have taken a year of our time and effort to build a certain amount, and then you go back to the factory and get taught certain things on the flying of it. That it seemed you couldn't take a year out of your life just for that.

We realised that with the twin two-seater ultralight, three access control, dual control, we could do everything we could virtually do with a little helicopter. Then also we realised we couldn't have carried the weight in that small helicopter. So the Drifter - Maxair Drifter was the ideal thing. Jen and I did a course with the Quicksilver near Phoenix and then from that we did a dealers course which was a longer one, including building the machine yourself on the parts they supply and work on the engine, as well as the flying.

So we got our microlight licence you might say in Scottsdale, Arizona, and then went over to the factory up in Pennsylvania where we saw the Maxair Drifter and practised flying on that, and building a luggage compartment under it. It was just a much more practical thing. So that's really how we got into that. The vast distances out there are so great, and with this you could land virtually anywhere.

Jen and I do it all on our own so we had now two vehicles and two aeroplanes. So we worked out this scheme that if we're going out to a certain area, one of us would drive one vehicle and the other would fly the plane. Then if you've got good filming conditions you'd stay there as long as you like under those circumstances and film. But when you had a little free time you could both fly back to pick up the second vehicle or the second aeroplane and so on, and that worked out extremely well. So wherever you stop you have your aeroplane there. So first thing in the morning you can fly around, look at everything and decide where's the best to be and do the detailed filming.

## **11. Working with microlights**

*Int: We were talking about flying. I was just going to ask you did you film from the - are they ultralights you call them?*

DB: Yes, ultralights. Well, microlights they call them in Europe, they're the same, interchangeable words.

Well, way back in Kenya, I decided to learn to fly and this is in the late 1950s, and Jen and I were both learning to fly in Kenya at the Aero Club. We both did this early flying with a Tiger Moth with the speaking tube, open cockpit, amazing machine. Most pilots love them. Jen got dysentery and we couldn't do it for a



while and then didn't get back to it. But I went on and got the Kenya private pilot's licence. Then later in Miami I renewed it then with enough hours. You've got to do so many hours ahead of your next medical and all that, and that worked.

But then I was up in the Arctic doing snow goose so I let it lapse. So we each did this course over in Arizona, Scottsdale, and then with the microlight. So it [the camera] mounted up at the nose. Also with the Drifters we haven't put a nose pod on which most people have. So that there's a six inch [diameter] tube sticking out and then we've got instruments mounted above that. So I mounted a frame in front, which I could lower the camera and set it at any angle, and by fitting an 8mm Ziess lens on the front, a wide angle, you can film from the plane. You don't have to even see through the viewfinder or have a videotape to know what you're taking in. So that worked extremely well.

Then Jen would fly, say, from the back seat and I would have a shoulder mounted Arriflex with a finger controlled time button. You'd set that at any speed too and that worked extremely. The combination of both worked well.

*Int: Now there was one occasion though that you came a cropper with your aircraft.*

DB: Well, that's a strange one.

*Int: What happened?*

DB: Well, Laurie Terroni is editing our films over here in England so we needed to come over and work with him, after Les Parry died, this is, of course. We tied the Drifters up where we'd tied them many times before and in that 11 years of filming, and the floods that do come through, only once did it ever reach the airstrip. We just moved them out to the other side of the dunes for a week or so until it dried up and then back onto that strip.

So we're away a total of thirty two days from our camp there at Auses and during that time a flood in such extent that wouldn't happen in one hundred years, I doubt if it happens every thousand years, came. Not only did the water flow down the Hoanib River but it must have rained really heavily on both sides of the flood plain and it came in from that from what we saw later from the air. The water on this giant flood plain must have been 20 feet deep. So not only did it get up to our tail planes but higher and higher until it covered the entire planes. Just the tip of one wing was sticking out by the silt on the plane.

So the engines were completely immersed and I filmed Jen shovelling up in our luggage compartment. There was 5 inches of silt on the lower end and only 3 inches on the front, shovelling that out. So the water had come up and down a few times and the sediment, this chocolate coloured mud, we had it in the planes everywhere. We'd had a repaired Rotax engine 502 in the cabin at Mowe so that went onto Jen's plane and then we got another one flown down from Windhoek, a new one, to put on mine. We got them both flying and so on, and I said to Jen, well, I won't be happy until it's been running at least 10 hours and this is a bit over 4 hours.

It would seem as if I must have been going down to do a precautionary landing on some sand there. I must have needed to give it a little more throttle and it mustn't have responded, and the wire near the wing tip



touched a tamarisk bush and it spun straight in. Sadly I had Mary Plage with me. Dieter Plage was one of my closest friends in the film side, we introduced Dieter and Mary to each other in the first place. So we're very close friends. We're both lucky to be alive. I shouldn't be alive. I should have been looking down seeing what they were doing.

Jen flew out into Mowe Bay and there was none of the wardens there as such. So she got onto the radio and ordered up the Med Rescue and let them know that we needed both a helicopter and a fixed wing aircraft to fly us up to Windhoek. So this happened at probably 10 in the morning and finally after dark when the helicopter was able to land there. Jen was able to light a fire and attract his attention, and they got Mary out to the main airstrip at Mowe Bay and a doctor looked after her there and so on.

Others had heard it on the radio that we'd had this accident and John Paterson came racing back and he had a lady doctor with him, so she came out too. So it was well after dark they dug me out of the sand. Then my foot was upside down alongside my ankle and we always wear crash helmets when flying. My memory of that was on the ground alongside me, so the crash helmet tied up tightly had come off when we hit the sand and I was concussed, severely concussed. So I think that was help from upstairs. I wouldn't have wanted to be there consciously all through that period and I didn't know a thing about it till about 10 days later in hospital. I think I would have fainted to see my foot upside down alongside my ankle. I knew nothing about it.

It's amazing that Mary and I are both alive. She'd broken some vertebrae and had some internal injuries. She recovered completely and my foot is still wrong angle onto the ground, it touches at that angle. So they want to cut a wedge out of a tallus bone and try and straighten it, and then put a couple of steel pins in. That'll be my seventh operation and the more I can do without it the less I want them to put me in plaster for three to four months. But evidently it's up to me now if it's giving me trouble with my back or my hips or anything like that.

*Int: Has that deterred you from flying?*

DB: Well, people are quite surprised. They say, "You are going to fly again?" It's the only way to go. Our friend Phil Lockwood from the States, he taught us to fly the Drifter originally up in Pennsylvania and then they moved to Florida. He visited us twice at Mowe Bay. He saw the conditions and so on and realised that to have the safety of two engines was very important for this type of low level filming. So he was sketching how to mount them, side by side, close together, and all that. While we were at the Geographic one time, one of the chaps wanted to do aerial filming in West Africa, over the rainforest, and got us to give them the detail of the Drifters, where to contact Phil and everything which we did.

When he heard where they were going to be over the rainforest, nowhere whatsoever to land, you have to crash onto the rainforest canopy and you'd never walk out from there. So he said the only way to go would be with a twin engine one which he'd been thinking about for a long time. So the Geographic put up fifty thousand US dollars for Phil to make the first one. And twice they sent it over to Brazzaville, and twice they got Phil to go over and fly it there and so on. It all worked out so well.

*Int: And you have one now?*

DB: Yes.



*Int: Twin engine.*

DB: Twin engine, yes. We went over to Florida and Jen did a complete US private pilot's licence because you have it registered in the States. It has a very small (N) number on the side and so to be legal, it's registered in the States, you have to be an American pilot to fly an American machine. So she can fly that anywhere in the world really legally now. So we get over flight permission in Namibia or to Botswana or Zimbabwe. Whilst she was flying a Cessna 152 for —. I was spending more time at the factory, designing where camera mounts should go and had it done right there at the factory. It was a beautiful job. And we've got one with an angle at the front, another one behind the second seat which shoots vertically down or slightly angled, and another one out on the wing that shoots back. Another one on top of the wing to show the engine stopping or starting in flight or to look back at Jen flying in the front seat and the whole of the scene.

So I'm just getting those fitted up now. Phil [Lockwood] came out from the States to help put it together and make sure it was tuned up properly and everything, so that's just been done. But there's so much smoke haze in the air in Namibia now, at this time of the year until the rains start, we decided not to do the aerial photography until we go back and wait for the rains to clear the air.

## **12. Current projects and reflections on wildlife filmmaking**

*Int: What are you working on at the moment?*

DB: Well basically one on the waterholes of Etosha in more detail, terrific stuff, with quelea and various other things. We've done one since doing the Survivors, Skeleton Coast Safari (23). That's a strange thing in this country also. We made this series called the Skeleton Coast Safari (23) and the first one's called Coast of Loneliness (24) and then the gravel plains, the Secrets of the Plains (25), and then The Sea of Sand (26) and Dwarfed by the Desert (27) on the elephant, and then Nad and Ginger's one on the baboons in the Kuiseb (28).

So we've finished another one which we're calling Namibian Safari (29), so we'd film anywhere in Namibia on that. That takes us from the desert showing the Drifters with all the silt on and all that, and getting them out and flying down there and then following them [the rivers], more or less where the storms have come from up to Etosha. Get to film the storms there and the animals and so on, and ending with pelicans and flamingos on Fischers Pan. That leads into the more permanent —. That dries up for about 10 months each year completely like the pan itself. So it's only when the rains come and the water that that gets water. So then we're showing now the permanent waterholes and what happens there. I started filming there in June of 1978. We'd never been to South West Africa before and decided to go there and see it, and we're still there. The changes that have taken place around all those waterholes. Trees that were then are no more. There's some new rangers, African rangers, and on our last trip to Etosha we've copied, now back in Swakopmund, we've copied a lot of the Survival films onto tape for them, to show them what it was like in 1978, 1980, and so on and the changes. So they're really keen to see it. So we posted that just before we came to Wildscreen and when we go back we'll see how it's been appreciated.

They have an environmental centre near Namutoni where all the schoolchildren are taught. It's so important for the young people, we're so pro 'doing it for the children' because they're the next generation and will be protecting it and looking after it. So it's great that they have this environmental centre for the children. So it's important to have some of the films on that. I'll gradually copy some of these films from other countries which if you grow up in a country you would expect everywhere to have animals like that or birds like that but it's not so. So I've put in one of the Wonderful Kangaroo (10) because I think that's one that children from other



countries would be amazed at, and learn a lot about with the marsupial and the babies and the hopping gait. So when we go back we'll hear about that.

Another thing that we've done is —, GTV in Johannesburg does video copies and sends them to people all over Africa and news stations. So we've given 100% of what would normally come to us of that to the Namibian Nature Foundation to help wildlife in the area. So that's working out extremely well.

More recently with the oiling of the penguins, the University of Windhoek and the Sea Fisheries have started a project, a two year project, on that. So we've given ten thousand dollars towards that project and another ten thousand now towards the black faced impala project. They were mixing with some of the ones from ordinary game farms with the regular impalas, and they wanted to sort that out. So, it turns out to be an Australian lass doing a study on that. We've contributed with this fund to that. Any sales of stills or anything we put that into it and other people have donated money. It all goes into this fund to help the wildlife in the area.

*Int: So you've been able to put something back.*

DB: Yes, it's important I think. Jen even feels even more strongly than I do. She's more than happy to do anything for the children and there was one programme we were on in the States, in Washington DC and the children asked all the questions. They had to interview us a bit like we're doing now but they asked the questions, they wanted to hear about. It's interesting.

*Int: They're probably quite perceptive.*

DB: They are, very much so. I'll tell you a funny story, you can cut it out of the tape. But in Australia many, many years ago temperance workers were going around the schools and they wanted the children to sign a pledge that they'd never touch this demon, alcohol. It had caused so much trouble and had caused accidents on the road, and this, that and the other. So they wanted them to sign a pledge that they would never touch this demon alcohol.

So to prove the point one lady got out two glasses and put it down on the desk in front of the class and put water into one glass and put whisky, straight whisky, into the other glass. Then she got tweezers and put a worm in the water and a worm in — and they were writhing and carry on for quite a long time. After a while the one in the whisky was dead and the one in the water was still going strong. So she said, "Little boys and girls what does that prove?" Silence. After a while one boy put up his hand. "Yes, what does it prove?" You know what he said? Not quite what she expected I don't think, "If you've got worms, drink whisky." They're so perceptive. A perfect answer. If it kills a worm, then if you got worms drink whisky, a perfect answer.

*Int: Thinking education wise you must have been mentor for many new faces in the industry. Can you recall some of the people that you've helped start?*

DB: As you say, there are many. Alan Root was one. When he was a schoolboy at 16 we did a sequence with him. He kept reptiles and had an outdoor place, and with one of his egg eaters he produced a fresh dove egg, and filmed the egg eating snake. When Alan was a schoolboy, still at high school in Nairobi. He has a wonderful sense of story and he worked with us for a while on these Animaland films (17) and other

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things.

Then Hugo van Lawick is the other one. His mother had seen Michaela [Denis] in Holland one time and said they had a son who's very keen and would like —. She said, "Well, what does he know about?" And she said, "Well, he really doesn't." She said, "Well, he should learn something." And all that. She was back there a year or so later and the mother met Michaela again and Hugo had been going around to different labs and various things to learn. So they agreed to take him on. So Hugo came out and joined us in Nairobi too, and lived with us. He loved insects and he was photographing those. One time when the land went down to the Mbagathi River at the bottom, a little stream, and Hugo went down one time and climbed a tree to get some of these tent caterpillars.

He must have fallen, landed on his back but broke his foot and he was in the Nairobi hospital, and he had all manner of nurses coming by, sisters and so on. Even the matron came, because he had written cause of accident —, and he wrote 'chasing caterpillars', and they'd say, "Can they really run that fast?" Poor Hugo he'd landed on his head and broke his ankle. One of the chaps came up to tell us and we went down there. It was a ghastly place and we had to take him into the hospital in the back of the panel van and so on. But he recovered completely from it and that was a nasty one. So everyone has close encounters doing this type of thing and the life you lead.

*Int: Have you had what might be called, apart from your upset with the aircraft, have you had near misses with animals?*

DB: Yes, you do but you're in their domain so you should behave yourself and act —. It's your fault if something really does happen. One of the early films I was doing in South Africa I was 'treed' by a rhino in Hluhluwe and was able to film it from the tree. When Armand [Denis] came over with the film, evidently the press and so on got on where is the cameraman filming in Armand and Michaela's, he went up the tree. We may have filmed those cut-in shots a thousand miles away, it didn't matter as long as it fitted as you know. After that I got a credit on the end of the film for photography.

But Armand Denis produced the films, he wrote the narration, the script and so on, had a great story telling ability. People underestimate what goes into it and with a film of this type no one person can do it all, that's for sure. He wanted to be known as the wildlife filmmaker - the cameraman. So at one stage in Kenya, Michaela [Denis] used to go into the auctions every time it was on to get different furniture and so on. Armand said one time, "Well, some people spend their money on cameras, and some people spend their money on furniture." And Michaela said, "Yes, and some people don't spend their money at all." She was laughing.

So with many of the film sequences he's carrying the camera but it's not loaded. So he didn't take a foot of film and we'd use the Bell & Howell. He'd leave the key up so that as you pressed it you could start it and stop it at any time and you'd see the key going round. But it never had any film in it.

*Int: How did you get on with him?*

DB: Famously, like a family. Turned out that he was 30 years older than I was and I think he liked it and respected that I could go into any area and film, come up with the goods, and if there was time or if it fitted in to go in with them and do the cut-in shots. The best worked out also with the native people. Michaela loved



dancing so if we were with the Zulus or anything she'd be there dancing with the people and the girls and the women, it was perfect and intimate. She loved to be filmed with any of the pet animals or with the people. It worked 100% that way and now I'm gradually getting these chapters together. I'd like to do one on Michaela herself and show some of these things.

*Int: Is there anybody you would say who influenced you greatly?*

DB: In the filming side?

*Int: In the filming side.*

DB: Well, as I say, reading this book, Married to Adventure by Osa Johnson (2), Americans, and they'd travelled around the world in remote places, the New Hebrides and this, that and the other. Then they even took two Sikorsky flying boats to Cape Town and flew them up to Kenya, based at our friend Raymond Hook's place near Mount Kenya itself. They saw a lot of the areas where they'd film their baboon film (30) all going through the stream and then they'd come back the other way and so on. It's a bit stretched on the number of baboons, but it's early days, done about 1935.

So reading that book turned me on 100% or 1,000% and that's when I gave up everything to get into it and study photography. It couldn't have been a better decision because for me it's a perfect life, and with Jen and I we just want to be with the wildlife, away from people. It works out well.

*Int: Des, you've been around quite a few parts of the world now and you must have seen the way that places have been changing over the years. How do you view the world and how it's going and the future of particularly wilderness?*

DB: I'm always positive, I'm not a pessimist like many people are. I think supposing mankind destroys things it makes everyone else more determined not to let that happen again and be more cautious for the future. There's so many people into wildlife now, who are into the thought of wildlife. We just like to be away from people where the wildlife is, just get on with it and that works out 100% as far as we're concerned but not everyone can do that. So in built-up areas where the wilderness or wildlife places are so important and where children can experience it. I think it's good now that in England now you have these children's zoo where they can stroke a sheep, a lamb or see chickens and so on but the average city person doesn't experience it.

I mean we've been brought up in the country all our life and so on and you take it for granted but others don't have that experience. I really think mankind will —. It's a bigger thing now with the hole in the sky, the ozone layer and this that and the other, and we've just heard in one of these films that the nuclear subs are reported that the Arctic ice, under the pole, North Pole, was water. The main thing is only six feet thick, that's quite a terrifying thing. That's a big change for the future because places like Florida will be flooded and a lot of places in England will be flooded.

*Int: Does wildlife filmmaking have a role to play in that?*

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DB: Definitely I think, yes, and I think each person should make the type of film that they enjoy making and can do, and the ones that want to get into these tough stories and everything or make the best job possible, they will do it. People see and learn and listen. You can't have all the wildlife films made exactly the same, so it's good to have —. And that's what Wildscreen is bringing out. They're not necessarily choosing the top quality films across the board, they're getting it from different other countries, newcomers and so on. It gives one, when you come here, a chance to see a broad spectrum of what has been seen, and for people like ourselves we're out behind the sand dunes, we don't get to see any of the things. But most people living in the UK have seen them all on television so they don't really need to be seeing them. So these other class —, master classes and so on, that's important too.

*Int: Do you come back and are surprised at what you see because you've been away and not watching television for so long? I mean do you see trends and fashions which are appearing in filmmaking which surprise you?*

DB: Yes. Well, the quality of the detail work is greater now. Each person puts their input into it. One person might be an electronic genius and work on that and miniaturise things. These little video cameras now, where they can be placed and record in colour and with such small amount of light it's quite amazing. We're still filming and will be for many years, I hope, on 16 mm, super 16. But we bought a Sony 1000 for Tarl, our grandson, to use and we've got another Canon with an interchangeable lens and so on, which is ideal for extending the period that you can be filming in dull light and so on, and for sync sound it's ideal.

We've done a series of six films now tentatively called Travels with Tarl (31), our grandson. He comes and visits us, bathing in a bucket out in the desert to now growing up. We've just been —. The one film that will be the last in the series, I think, in Etosha national park. To start with I thought it would be great to teach your grandson how to make good wildlife films, perfect. But I hadn't anticipated that he knew it all already so we're inclined to bump heads a bit to start with. Now that it's coming together and he's seen it on screen he's realised the importance of it, and some of the recordings of him. He got to see it the other night when we saw it for the first time. He thinks he could do better so now he wants to repeat those. He doesn't want his friends to hear him talking like that I think it amounts to, so that a definite plus.

He loves chameleons and finds them in all sorts of places. We've done a lot with chameleons out there this last time at Spitskoppe and we're following the chameleon round. It was getting grasshoppers from various places and Jen noticed where it was heading. It was just to the side of where there was a snakeskin. We think it was a inaudible, a small type of snake. She thought, well, when the chameleon passes, I'll pick it up and just see what species it is, see if we can identify it. As the chameleon got there he turned his head, zap, he got this snakeskin and he swallowed that whole snakeskin. Then climbed up onto a quartz rock about six feet high and swallowed the last part up there. I was able to get the camera down on the ground and film him and the Spitskoppe, this wonderful matterhorn of Africa, in the background, all sharp. I joked to Jen that we've never seen it written up, no one's seen it written up, but once people see that on screen they'll send a cameraman out to get a chameleon eating a snakeskin. That's so funny.

Also we were about the first for television doing Patagonia in Valdez, the point there where the killer whales go for the things. Now the BBC has done it so beautifully, ten times better than we would ever have been able to do it. But it all follows on and in Midway with the sharks getting the young albatrosses. Now that one person's filmed it everyone going there will be aiming to cover that, cover it even better perhaps. So it's ongoing, it's improving all the time. I think it's just great.

DB: You've probably got more than enough now. No-one will ever want to see it.

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*Int: Oh, don't be so sure about that!*

**END**

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