INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT MANKE
MAY 26, 2000

Q. This is Raimund Goerler. I’m interviewing Robert Manke for the oral history program of the Byrd Polar Research Center Archival Program, a program that is funded by the National Science Foundation. Mr. Manke, I appreciate your willingness to cooperate in this program. Can you begin by discussing what motivated you to join the Navy, what aspirations did you have?

A. Well at that time in my life I was 17 years old. Joining the Navy or staying in high school were my options at the time. I was a good student in industrial arts and history, but not in English and the sciences. And I also was in a school system that was basically college prep and didn’t offer very much in my line of industrial arts or trades. I always had the urge to travel but never had the opportunity. So I left school with one year to go and joined the Navy in September, 1957. At the time I thought it was the best thing for me and that’s what I did. I had heard of the Seabee’s as a young boy growing up from an uncle who was a Seabee during World War II and listened to his tales and events and it sounded good to me. Plus he was also in the same line of work that I am in now. When I joined the Navy, I requested training as a Seabee, but because I wasn’t a high school graduate they couldn’t guarantee it. So I just took my chances and enlisted anyway. And as it turned out with the test that they give you after you’re
in boot camp, I guess I scored alright on that part of it and they did put me into the
Seabee’s. Because right after boot camp I was sent to utilitymens school in
California to learn air conditioner, refrigeration, boilers, pumps, and compressors.
And then upon completion of 16 weeks of school I was assigned to Midway
Island, which is how my traveling was starting. They put me in the public works
department there which is mostly all Seabee’s doing base maintenance. Midway
was a beautiful island. Not quite the South Pacific though, but it was an
interesting place to be with the gooney birds and what have you. But as a single
18 year old, there wasn’t any liberty dates, etc. So it became a little on the boring
side after a while and probably couldn’t wait to get out of there. But after being
there for eight months, the Navy asked for volunteers for the Antarctic program.
Naturally I thought well this is a lot of different, so I volunteered, raised my hand,
and three weeks later I was on my way to Davisville, Rhode Island for training in
the Antarctic.

Q. Can you discuss that special training that you received in Rhode Island for your
service in Antarctica?

A. Yes. The training basically started with physicals which was both body and
mental which was probably the most important thing. They weren’t going to go
any farther if you couldn’t get through that.

Q. By mental, you mean psychological?

A. Yes. Part of the mental is we had gone to three different psychiatrists and two of
them had to pass you in order to go. The physical part wasn’t any problem. We
went to lectures on what to expect in Antarctica as far as living conditions,
working conditions, the cold. We went to schools and worked with heavy gloves on to simulate conditions down there which Rhode Island in the summer was nothing like Antarctica in the winter. But anyway, we erected buildings, handling nuts and bolts with these heavy gloves on. We were taught to drive heavy equipment, caterpillar tractors, cats weasels, etc. Vehicles that we would be familiar with down there. And we had movies on the Antarctic from previous expeditions. And that basically was it. We were fitted for our winter clothes and items of that nature. That was basically the training that I can recall at this time.

There may have been more.

Q. Do you recall roughly how long the training was?
A. Approximately six months, we were in Davisville.

Q. Okay.
A. And I also had earned my GED diploma while I was in Davisville, so I guess that made up for the part of not finishing high school. As I was slated to winter over at McMurdo Sound, I didn’t give any thought as to what lay ahead as to my job and duties there. I had a general idea of what I’d be doing, but until you get to a place you never know. I think the biggest thing on my mind at the time was the flight from Christ Church to McMurdo Sound. I found out I wasn’t the most uneasies, flying over all that cold water, 13 hours in the air on a 124 Globemaster. But we all survived that flight. I think at the time was my biggest concern. Being down there wasn’t a problem, it was just getting there. It’s a lot different today. After about a week at McMurdo, after I settled in, etc., I was told to pack all my gear and I was being sent to Little America 5 and the reason being, they were
closing that base and taking all the equipment out that they could. There were quite a few tractors there, traverse sleds and what have you, that they wanted to get to Byrd Station. I was also told that I was going to go on the overland traverse to Byrd. And that would be my final duty station. They were changing my duty is what they were doing. And I did not know the reason at the time, but it worked out real well. At Little America 5, I was working for an Army colonel, Merrill Dawson, who I guess was an expert at the time on trans-Antarctic travel over snow and ice. I was very happy to get a chance at this. This was quite an adventure I had not expected. At Little America 5 I was keeping the base heated, snow melters working, getting the overland sleds which they called Wannagons, one for sleeping, one for eating, we were getting those ready, checking over all the plumbing for the snow melters on those and other equipment. About a week before we were to leave on the tractor train, Colonel Dawson told me that space was tight and that I wouldn’t be going on the traverse, but they needed me at Byrd anyway for replacement. And I guess that evening I was put on the USS Glacier which was docked at the Ross Ice Shelf, and to go back to McMurdo to catch a flight to go into Byrd Station. Boarding was the glacier off the ice shelf was quite an adventure in itself, climbing up an extension, over swirling water, which I remember vividly. I spent three days on an icebreaker. It was my first and only time on a Navy ship and it was three days back to McMurdo Sound. One day out we got into real heavy ice. Breaking the ice was slow going, so after two days they flew me off in a helicopter to McMurdo, where at the time I was supposed to
go right on to Byrd, but Byrd Station was weathered in. They were having a bad
storm there. So while waiting for the weather to clear …

Q. So you took the helicopter from the Glacier to McMurdo?

A. Yes. Due to bad weather at Byrd Station, I was sitting at McMurdo for three
days and on Thanksgiving Day in McMurdo, they said I was to fly out that night to
Byrd Station, which I had had my Thanksgiving at McMurdo the next day I flew
back across the international date line and landed at Byrd Station on
Thanksgiving. So that year I enjoyed two Thanksgivings. Just thought I’d throw
that in. But once I got to Byrd, I had never given any thought for volunteering for
an outlying station, not knowing that much about what went on down in the
Antarctic, but I’m glad I had the opportunity to winter over at Byrd. The many
people I knew from Davisville were stationed there, total of 10 altogether, and 11
civilian scientists. The adjustment was very easy for me. As for the scientists, who
I all met for the first time, I got to know each and every one of them as time
progressed. My main duties at Byrd was keeping the base heated, heaters
refueled, snow melters working, pumps working on the snow melter system. That
summer after I got there we erected two new barracks buildings and a new truck
garage and also a generator house. These had to be put down on the same level as
the base which was approximately ten feet under the ice and snow at that time.
And we had to help out with snow removal after storms, etc., basically what a
pipefitter would do here in the winter in the states, I was doing the work down
there. Just general maintenance on my part. I was also the wash machine
repairman, dryer repairman. Our only refrigeration unit was in the sick bay area
which halfway through our tour there the refrigerator went and I had to repair that, which was quite interesting as we did not have a lot of parts, but we did get it working. It was vital to the drugs and medication that were kept there in case of emergency. Once a month approximately Chief Davis and I would have to refuel our fuel storage tanks down below. This meant going outside in any kind of weather, digging the drums of diesel fuel out of the snow from our supply area, which was airdropped earlier in the summer. We had approximately 2,000 gallons each month to pump down into the base. It was quite an operation digging out the barrels. We had to load them onto twenty ton sleds, bring them back to the base, and then start the pumping operation down underneath the ice. This was an operation that had to be done every month, summer and winter. I had to go out every day and refuel the only building that was on top of the snow where they released the weather balloons twice a day. It seemed each day at Byrd was a challenge, due to the cold weather and the constant wind blowing.

Q. Mr. Manke, airlifting and retrieval of supplies was vital to the operation of the base. Can you give a little more detail about how things were airlifted, stored and then recovered?

A. Yes. Everything was airdropped to us by C124 Globemasters at that time. They would call ahead and let us know when they were coming and we would be out on a drop zone which was marked off. It was an area marked off where we wanted all our supplies dropped. They would come in, drop the parachutes and we would never know what we were getting until it landed on the ground, whether it was diesel fuel, parts to run the base, machine parts, food, etc. After the parachutes
were dropped and they flew off, we would retrieve all the supplies, check off what we had, and they would be stored on top of the ice in different areas. All these areas were marked with long bamboo poles with red flags on the top. A sketch was drawn as to where each different supplies were scored because in time, with the blowing and drifting snow, everything would be covered. So we drew a sketch, we knew where everything was if and when we had to get it. As for the fuel, which was the biggest area, it was all set on top of the snow and ice but we had to dig it out when we went out for this refueling operation. And it seemed the colder it got, and it was completely dark during the winter, it was tougher and tougher as the fuel was getting lower and lower, we had to do more digging.

Q. Okay. Good.

A. In the summer, we worked seven days per week, twelve hour shifts, with Sunday evening off for a movie and popcorn. We had two days off that summer, Christmas and New Years, and then worked every day until winter set in at the end of February. There were not too many problems that I was aware of that came up. Of course I wasn’t running the base; I was just one of the people to help keep it going. Day to day little problems would come up and we’d work together and solve whatever it was, whether a building was starting to creak or something was caving in, we had to do a lot of shoring up as the build up of snow and ice on top of it was getting heavier and heavier as the winter progressed. Those I can remember being the biggest problem. The last plane left us in late February of 1960, and I think at that time it hit me that we were truly alone and I got to thinking of a lot of what ifs. What if war broke out in the states or someplace else
and everybody went there and we were stuck down here. We knew we had a two
year supply of food and fuel, but all these thoughts go through your head as the
last plane leaves and we knew we were isolated there until the following October.
Also, what if one of us got seriously ill? Could we trust the doctor who was also
the base commander. We didn’t know that much about him, you know, only being
19, I was the youngest one there. At first I did not have too much in common with
the other nine Navy personnel. I was single The rest were married, some with
children. They were in their mid to late 20’s. The civilian scientists were older,
late 20’s to late 30’s. In time I seemed to mesh with everyone and although I
didn’t have all the sea stories and experiences of others, I enjoyed the time shared
with everyone. To this day I still remember mostly everyone, both Navy and
civilian scientists and can remember stories told by each. Some of the Navy
people, have kept in touch over the years, Christmas cards and what have you,
and after about 30 years of sending Christmas cards back and forth, sometimes
notes, letters, we thought it would be a good idea to maybe have a reunion with
the people we could find and we tried to find others. This was 1991. Well we did
locate maybe five Navy people total to have a reunion. As we did not have any
luck in finding the rest of them, the reunion never came about. But we all agreed
that we would try and visit one another. And it was quite amazing to me when I
met these people at their homes, a couple of them have been to mine, we would sit
down and talk and it was like we had never been apart after 31 years. The
conversation just seemed to pick up and go from time or the time we were there
and that struck me as remarkable. I guess living in such tight conditions, you learn
a lot about everyone. Their whole histories as we had no one else to talk to in all that time.

Q. Mr. Manke, would you comment on the command of the base at Byrd Station?

A. Well, we had one officer who was a doctor and he was also in charge of the base. Normally a doctor doesn’t hold command in the Navy of any base, but in this case they made an exception. And on the civilian site they had one scientist that was in charge. The doctor who was a very nice person, got along well with everybody, he was just out of medical school and I didn’t think (my own observation) I didn’t think that he wanted to be there. He had told us that. He was forced to take the assignment. He had no choice as we were all volunteers. He had to come here and spend a year, fourteen months. He would go off by himself sometimes. We wouldn’t see him for a week or two, being up at night, and we worked days and slept nights during the winter. There was not too much action military wise. We had a chief petty officer, Chief Davis who basically ran the base for the whole year on the military side, handing out job assignments, what had to be done, things of that nature. The civilian scientists would have a lot of interaction with the Navy as they were part of us. We had our meals together. We didn’t work together. They had their jobs, we had ours. For the most part it was very cordial, working with the scientists. I had learned about the different jobs they do. Jobs I never realized existed, some of the scientists such as seismologists I remember, the releasing of the weather balloons twice a day. But everyone seemed to get along real well. The only time we wouldn’t see the scientists around is after a storm when we had to do a lot manual snow removal to get in
and out. They seemed to disappear, which was okay I guess. We thought well, maybe they should be doing their part too, because it was their livelihood that we were protecting also. But they did help out on mess duties. Everyone took their turn. Once a week you had to do the dishes for the cook and clean up after meals, etc., fill the snow melter for the cook, and they did help out on that. That’s about all I can say on that. From what I can remember, as far as any conflicts between the Navy and the civilian scientists, the only part that they wouldn’t help out in, after bad storms we were left with a lot of snow blown on top of some of the buildings that were questionable as to whether they would cave in or not. As we couldn’t get heavy equipment on top of these buildings, everything had to be hand shoveled away and we just thought the more hands that were available, the easier it would be for everybody. A few of the scientists, two in particular I can remember helping out, the rest definitely would not do the manual labor. I guess they figured that wasn’t part of their duty. I remember just about everyone that I wintered over with. When I look back at the pictures, I remember pleasant times spent together under the most adverse conditions. I think the things that got to me the most were the constant wind blowing. After a while that was the only noise we heard, especially in the winter, because everything being so quiet. There were no outward noises, outside; it was just that constant whistling of the wind. Also, at night when you were in your bunk, the buildings would be creaking under the weight of all that snow. I think at the beginning of the winter we had about ten feet on top of us and at the end when we left, there was close to twenty feet of snow that had accumulated on top of the buildings. So you would lay in your bed
and you would hear this constant shifting or whatever it was, the weight of the snow. That was I think our biggest concern. One storm I’ll never forget, we had winds over 100 miles an hour, temperatures of 50 below zero, and it lasted for eight days. It bent our radio antennas, the constant wind blowing. It just bent them right in half. Didn’t break them, just bent them, but we lost most of the communication. We could not go outside and fix them because of the strong winds and the cold. It also blew some of the smoke stacks that came up through the ice from the buildings and after the storm it took me over a week to go and replace all of the smoke stacks, sometimes having to climb down on top of the buildings and replacing the whole stack, which was a concern to me, climbing down lack into a crevasse, but we did get the job done.

Q. Mr. Manke, would you comment on the group as a whole during the wintering over experience?

A. Well as winter progressed and we were all huddled down inside, there were not to many tensions that I can recall between the civilians and the Navy. We all seemed to get along fairly well. We had a lot of good times together, talks and what have you. There were a couple of the civilians that seemed to be loners. They went off by themselves, they did their job and didn’t seem to socialize or interact to much with the Navy, but that was okay. There was no hostilities or anything like that. They did their thing and we did ours. But basically everyone seemed to get along. I was not aware of any problems. I think as the winter progressed we were all just looking for the summer to come again and the chance to get out of there and head back to the states.
Q. So you didn’t notice any depression during this very dark period?
A. None that I can recall. One of the weathermen there, his wife had a baby while we were down there and he was probably the most depressed, that I noticed he couldn’t wait to get out of there. I can understand that now, I couldn’t then. But you know having your first child and you’re down there in the South Pole and your wife is back in New York. And it was tough on him. And I know that bothered him and he was one of the first ones out I think on the first plane. They took him out so he could get back.

Q. The previous people that I’ve interviewed commented on the importance of Ham radio as connecting to the outside world. Did you have that experience at Byrd Station?
A. Oh yes, quite fortunate one of the nice things of being at Byrd and a small base like that, we had the chance to use the Ham radio as our communication with the outside world. In fact, I got adept at operating the radio and some of my leisure hours were spent talking to people all over the world. I had, I think they call it a radio phone patch, set up with a gentleman in my area of New York and every Tuesday night at 8:00 we would meet on the radio and I would get a chance to talk to my parents, my girlfriend who is now my wife. We had a chance to chat for a little while and it was very nice. I think being in McMurdo, the people didn’t have the opportunity to use the radio that often, so I felt fortunate that way to have some outside communication on a regular basis with the outside world.

Q. Mr. Manke, you were at Byrd Station and you almost made it to the South Pole. Would you care to comment please?
Well all the equipment that was brought from Little America 5 the previous summer, was brought into Byrd Station with the idea of it going on the South Pole base. At that time, they did not have the heavy equipment at the pole base due to logistics. They had no way of getting it there other than over land or on ice. I had the chance to go on the traverse from Byrd Station to the South Pole base, a distance of about 900 miles. And it was the first time this was ever tried through a lot of uncharted territory, especially a lot of crevasses, crossing a mountain. It would have been a very interesting trip because they were taking D8 Caterpillar tractors and other heavy equipment into the South Pole base. But as my time approached to leave, I decided to go state side and get on with my life, so I turned it down. And I had previously talked to people who went on it and I probably should have gone on it for the experience, but that’s something that I can’t go back to. But they all told me it was quite an adventure, being the first time. I was discharged March, 1961, not knowing at the time, fortunately I didn’t re-enlist. I can remember other people getting orders to Indochina, not knowing what they were getting into. At that time, the Vietnam war was starting up before people even heard of Vietnam and the Seabees were over there building air stripes, bases and I guess getting ready for the war. So I’m glad I did take my discharge and depart from the Navy. I’ve been a member of the Polar Society for about the past ten years due to Tom Oswald, who had told me about this. I enjoy reading about the events that are still going on, all the new discoveries, both on land and underwater. And I was saddened to hear that the Navy is no longer used there after so many years. I would very much like to return and see all the changes. I
follow the National Geographic specials on Antarctica and read any news items that come my way. I read about a large iceberg that broke off from the Ice Shelf about the size of Rhode Island and they’re tracking that. Any events that I do read about Antarctica are all interesting. There’s been an awful lot of changes since I’ve been there. When we went down in 1959 we were basically camping out as compared to the way, from what I understand, the bases are now, especially having women there, which was unheard of back when I wintered over. Upon coming back to this area, I married my girlfriend, Barbara, in 1962. She wrote and we talked on amateur radio when I was on the ice. We have three children, boy being the oldest, and two girls. Being married for almost 37 years and we now have seven grandchildren. I started a job in February of 1962 at Western Electric in Buffalo, New York, which is now Lucent Technologies, and was accepted into the maintenance department as a pipefitter due to my Navy experience. I worked for them for 15 years and they moved out of town, closed up the place. I went across the street to General Motors, Chevrolet Forge, also as a pipefitter and worked there for 21 years until 1997, and it was sold to an outside concern. To stay with General Motors I transferred here to Lockport, New York, GM Harrison Radiator. I hope to work for six more years and then retire after 30 years at GM. I’m sure I have the Navy to thank for starting me in the right direction and giving me a career. All the training that had started with the Navy stayed with me my whole working life. Although I regret dropping out of high school, I still think I did the right thing by joining the Navy. I have never lost a day of work due to job changes. I left one place on a Friday and started the next on a Monday. This I
attribute to the Navy training and teaching me a trade. I make good money at what I do and they’ve given me a comfortable lifestyle. I think my experience in the Antarctic taught me that I can survive the harshest environments, the isolation, to learn how to get along well with people, work well with people. If anyone can winter over in the South Pole, I think it teaches them to survive just about anything that comes their way in life. I’m told when we went to the South Pole in 1959, that at the time there were less than 1,500 people who had wintered over there, that was known. I am proud to have had the opportunity. I know it made me a better person.

Q. Mr. Manke, it’s clear from your previous discussion that you have very fund memories of your experience in Antarctica, especially at Byrd Station, and I suspect that part of the reason you have such good memories is because of the social aspects of living at Byrd Station. Can you comment on that part of life?

A. Oh sure. As I said before, everyone seemed to get along fairly well. Our cook there, who was the only cook we had, on everyone’s birthday he always made a cake for them. I think he worked the hardest of anybody at the base because he had to be there three meals a day every day, and being the only cook, he had to do all the preparation, and meal planning. On Sunday nights in the summer we had our movie which was our only entertainment for the week, and he always made sure we had enough hot buttered popcorn, things of that nature, which made it all that important. As time went on and we wintered in, we were down inside most of the time, we would have occasional parties, whether for holidays, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, would be our big parties, and we would really get into socializing.
All your drinks have to be refrigerated in the states, beer, soft drinks, etc. Down there everything was frozen, being stored outside, so when it was brought inside, all our beer had to be warmed up. Our soft drinks had to be warmed up so we could consume them. Everything we had down there was frozen at one time or another. We did get into some good parties. Everybody enjoyed themselves. And I think this all helped to make us more close to one another as far as getting along, things of that nature. We had a mid-winter overing party sometimes in July of that winter. It was like a halfway point there, halfway through the winter anyway. And I can remember the doctor, the one officer and our chief petty officer, dressed up in white shirts, ties and all that. And they served us a sit down dinner, took our orders, made a restaurant setting, which was very nice. This was something they didn’t have to do and probably in their whole Navy career never expected to do anything like this, serving enlisted men. Plus the civilian scientists we included. They came and took our orders, they had our plates made up and brought it back. One of the highlights of the year I guess was having the officer and the chief petty officer serving enlisted men.

Q. Mr. Manke, Byrd Station had some physical details, aspects of physical existence at Byrd Station that were different from McMurdo. Would you comment please?

A. Well at the time I didn’t know it. I was glad that I got the chance to winter over at Byrd. I think being with a smaller group of people was a lot more enjoyable on the whole. Of course that was my own observation at the time. Our living conditions at Byrd, we were all in separate rooms basically. The ceiling was open but we all had our own separate rooms, so we did have that little bit of privacy
that you wouldn’t have at the main station at McMurdo, where everybody was in a barracks type there. The heating system was kept at about 65 degrees inside the barracks and it was a forced air system that we had, where at McMurdo they had basically space heaters in each building. So people on the top bunks would be very uncomfortable with the heat or that would be the preferred place to be for the warmth and the people on the bottom bunks were a lot colder and had to use their sleeping bag or more blankets or whatever they used. That was an advantage. I think just being with a smaller group of people to me was a better advantage than being in a whole community. That was my perspective of it.

Q. Mr. Manke, the social aspect was of course significant for group cohesion. Can you talk a little bit more about the parties and the honor system in place at Byrd Station?

A. Well, being that we were at an isolated station, we didn’t have a club to go for socializing. We didn’t have what would normally be a bar or enlistment club, so we had to make our own and a builder there in his spare time put together a beautiful bar and it was written up in papers down there at the time. He built a back bar, mostly out of scrap lumber and what have you. As we weren’t paid the whole time we were there, any purchases we had to make such as beer, soft drinks, film for the cameras, toothpaste, stuff of a personal nature, was about all we had to buy, and cigarettes, was all put on an honor system. If we went and purchased something or took something, we wrote down on the paper what it was and when we got back to McMurdo after our tour, everything was going to be cashed out at that time and that’s when we pay our bill and take any money that
was due us. This worked out very well. For the people who were drinking, I remember now, we had two kinds of beer down there, Budweiser and Miller. And at that time when you froze beer, at least Budweiser beer, in order to drink it you had to thaw it out, but the yeast used to separate from the beer I guess. So in the process of drinking it you would have all these clammy like soft goobers which was the yeast separated from the beer. So all the beer drinkers had their little piece of cheese cloth that they would put over the glass and strain the beer so they could drink it like a normal beer would taste. Myself not being a beer drinker I didn’t have that problem. I was more into Cokes and other soft drinks. We did what they called a white out punch that was used for different holidays and celebrations, Christmas and New Years and what have you.

Q. Let me interrupt for a moment. We’re getting the tape warning light, so let’s continue on the other side. You were talking about the difficulties that the beer drinkers experienced in dealing with thawed beer, especially Budweiser.

A. Yes, the straining of Budweiser. Miller didn’t seem affected but the Miller Beer we ran out of about four months into our tour, just after the planes left, only because that the beer that people didn’t have to strain. And then the beer drinkers were left with Budweiser for the rest of the year. We also made a concoction on holidays or special days, what they called white out punch. And the ingredients in that was 190 proof medicinal alcohol along with different kinds of fruit punches that were added and it was made into a punch. Two glasses of this was very potent and you were usually on your way to a very melancholy evening so to speak. But I can remember our cook who was from the mountains of Tennessee
and was into distilling, I guess various liquids in his youth. He could drink this stuff straight, this 190 proof alcohol, and we had made bets on it that he couldn’t. Well he did and showed us. Well after that, because of the seriousness of the way that leaves you, the doctor, also the base commander, poured the rest of it down the drain. That was the end of it because he didn’t want anybody getting into any serious difficulty. And that was the end of any kind of drinks other than the beer. But halfway through it at the mid-winter party, the doctor, unbeknownst to us, brought down a bottle of I.W. Harper. I guess it’s bourbon, I’m not sure. I don’t remember now. And each one of us was given a bottle at the mid winter party when they were serving us. I think when I left there I may have taken two or three sips out of mine and I left it with the person that replaced me. That tells you what kind of a drinker I was.

Q. Mr. Manke, I appreciate your willingness to participate in this program. This brings us to the end of the interview. And I think we’ve captured some very useful details and insight. I appreciate your cooperation. Thank you.

A. Thank you.