Martin Visser

Radio Technician - Parks Canada

Oral History Project
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Interviewer: Edwin Knox
Cultural Resource Management
Waterton Lakes National Park

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Knox: Waterton Lakes National Park oral history project, and I'm here this evening with Martin Visser. I'm Edwin Knox with Parks Canada here in Waterton. And it's April 6, 2016. And Martin, you worked with Parks Canada for many years, with the job title radio tech. You can set me straight on that.

Visser: Okay, you bet. I started off as radio technician in May of 1982 – that's when I started with Parks Canada. And essentially, when I started, my job was to be a field service technician for the western region, which at that time basically was just Alberta and British Columbia. And that, over the years, has evolved into, essentially, the area expanding from just B.C. and Alberta to everything up to the Ontario border and all regions north. And the only thing we're not directly involved in was Ontario through to the east coast. In 1995, there was a number of direct downsizing and reconfiguration of the complete systems as far as staffing goes. So at that point, our section was essentially eliminated other than my position. And the thought process was at that time that we would move to contracting out services, and that was all supposed to be finalized by 1998.

For whatever political reasons, they decided at that point in '98, that it was more cost effective to staff the positions internally. So at that point, they brought another technician in to replace the guy who retired in Jasper, and the same thing in Banff. So at that point, we went from originally seven positions, down to one, and then back to three. And essentially, now, we're at the point of where there's only one full-time position in Calgary and one in Jasper, and Banff is contracted out. And right at this time, I'm a temporary employee. So I just work whenever they need somebody …some assistance.

Knox: Yes. And across the entire system of parks, Martin, how many radio techs were there when you started? Or in the heyday of that position, and…

Visser: Okay. Yeah. When I started in 1982, there was five technicians – one in Banff, one in Jasper, and two in Calgary, and we had one guy in Winnipeg. And then, the following year, they added another position in Winnipeg and one more position in Calgary. So that was – during the heyday, I guess you'd call it, there was a lot of expansion at that point. We were – the technology had changed. Before, a lot of equipment was very power hungry, so most of the repeaters were along the highways, and the only coverage within the parks was essentially along the highway corridors. Starting in about 1985, we moved a lot of equipment up to mountaintops, which increased the coverage, you know, probably

three-fold. So we were now getting radio coverage into the backcountry where a lot of activity was starting to take place.

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Prior to that, very few people went to the backcountry, and those that did go were typically very self-reliant. Starting in the mid-80s into the '90s, a lot of the people going into the backcountry were not that familiar with what was required, and a lot of rescues were required. A lot of people got hurt. So communications was a big deal to try and rectify or minimize the costs and the time involved to rescue people. And the wardens, who also relied on communications - just to make sure everybody was safe. There was much more emphasis on occupational health and safety starting in the '90s than there ever was before. Before, people would go into the backcountry for a week or two weeks and nobody would hear from them. And that was okay because they were self-reliant.

And very few incidents actually ever happened, but that all started to change in the '80s and '90s. Occupational health and safety wasn't too happy with the way things were going. So we, essentially, put in communications systems to address those deficiencies.

Knox: 1979, in Banff National Park, was the year Neil Colgan, Park Warden on [horse] patrol in the upper Red Deer River, had an accident [fatal accident]. And didn't have communication, such to call out for help. Would that have been – like you're describing?

Visser: That would… You bet. That would – that's the kind of stuff that really started it. And that's actually probably one of the reasons I got my job. It's because of incidents that did happen, and they started to see the real value in it [radio communications]. And you know, it's not just the cost thing; it was the human life aspect that was becoming much more important.

Knox: Yes. We'll come back to that, Martin. And prior to Parks in '82, you had work experience with radios.

Visser: Yes, I did. I started actually in the military in 1974. And I did that for six years, and then I went into private industry for two years. And then, I was lucky enough to get the job with Parks Canada.

Knox: And for the years since, you've been the go-to person.

Visser: It seems to be. Yes.

Knox: Would there be others in the system that have been to as many parks, as many places, over the span of years?

[00:06:29]

Visser: You know …in the radio field?

Knox: Yes.

Visser: No. I've been lucky enough to have been to 36 parks over my career. So I'm missing just a few of the older ones, and then recently, they've added a few more new parks, which I haven't had the opportunity to go to yet. But I'm hoping to get that in over the next few years, to get a few more of them.

Knox: And in Banff, in 1982, can you reflect on some of your first – some of the first work that you would have done then with Park Canada, with the radio system?

Visser: Back in those days – like I say, all our repeaters were along the highway. And they were tubed radios, if you can believe that. They were still running tube radios. We had propane generators to power the equipment, which we had to go and fill. So not only as the radio technician, you also had to be able to change propane and work on thermal generators and gas generators, diesel generators. It was quite involved. Mobiles and stuff for the vehicles were probably three to four times the size that they are now. So you had to have mechanical ability to be able to fit all of that stuff into the equipment, especially some of the pickups and stuff. You know, you're talking huge radios and where do you put them? It was quite a challenge.

But typically, in those days, it would take a day or a day and a half to install a full radio into a vehicle. You know, that same thing now, you can do it in a matter of two hours. So it was a lot more time consuming. And the equipment itself was much less reliable than it is today. So it was not uncommon to have to do preventative maintenance twice a year. Now we do preventative maintenance once every two to three years, so it's quite a difference.

Knox: And it was radios then – a radio repeater along the highway, a radio in a truck and – or a handheld that a park warden would be using along that main valley where that radio repeater was located?

Visser: Correct. And not that many wardens actually had portables. They were in the vehicles, but you know, in a warden group of maybe ten wardens, there may only be five portables, and they would have to share those. So when one went down, it was a big deal, because that was, you know, anywhere up to 20 to 25 percent of their radio equipment was down.

Knox: And in the very early days of Parks and patrols into the backcountry by the park warden, there was communication through the phone.

Visser: Field phones. Correct.

Knox: A line strung along either poles or trees.

[00:09:18]

Visser: Correct. Correct.

Knox: And were those still operational, maybe, when you started?

Visser: They were, actually. And one of my very first jobs in the late summer of 1982 was to go to Sunwapta and Jasper [townsite], and I had to help them remove some of the wiring that ran all the way from Sunwapta to Jasper, which is probably 50 or 60 miles. And that was one of my first jobs, was to go there, and roll wire.

Knox: Sunwapta Warden Station?

Visser: Correct.

Knox: Located a distance from Jasper, and literally 50 miles of copper wire would be rolled up.

Visser: You bet. You bet.

Knox: And at that point, your new radio system and technology were replacing that entirely?

Visser: Correct. We actually got the repeaters – or they had the repeaters in when I had started, and they had field tested them for the winter. And people were happy with it, so they started to take out the wiring from some of the larger warden offices. But the ones in the backcountry were still there and still operational, probably until the middle ‘80s. And like I say, I went to the Ya-Ha-Tinda Ranch probably in ‘83, and we actually rewired the field phone wires. And that was still operational until probably almost 1990.

Knox: Do you ever remember any park warden speaking with skepticism about the new system that we…

Visser: Oh, absolutely.

Knox: …shouldn’t be pulling the wire yet?

Visser: Yeah, absolutely. “It’s not going to work (laughing)!”

Knox: What were the issues, maybe, they were concerned about?

Visser: They were concerned even for the ground ones, running out of propane, or the repeaters failing. I mean, from their residences and offices, they always had the phone. It always worked. So moving to a new technology that did fail occasionally – and when it did fail, it was – it didn’t matter what time of day or night, you’d be getting a phone call saying this thing’s not working. We did a lot of running around probably until the – even up ‘til the middle ‘90s. When a radio or something would go down it was a major deal.

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You know, I mean, the field phone lines also went down. You know, a tree would knock them down and break the lines. They would think nothing of being without that [communication] for a week. And they would go out with their horse and repair the line themselves. But when it became the new technology, they couldn't work with that. So therefore, they were reliant on us to do it. And yeah, there was [reluctance].

Knox: Up the Red Deer River valley from the Ya-Ha-Tinda, there'd be Scotch Camp, Sandhills, and Cyclone [patrol cabins].

Visser: Correct. All connected together.

Knox: Would they ever have had the physical copper wire? Like…

Visser: Absolutely.

Knox: Right to Cyclone Cabin?

Visser: You bet. All the way through there.

Knox: And then, a park warden in the 19… late '80s, at Cyclone Cabin, when he did his radio call to Banff in the evening, he was on a system called the single-sideband?

Visser: Correct.

Knox: And was that part of the technology which you serviced?

Visser: Oh, yeah. We serviced that as well. That actually came in – oh, that was probably even as far back as the early '60s. And essentially, it's just very low frequency. And for some places like Cyclone, they could actually talk to Jasper better than they could to Banff, just because of the way that the propagation would actually jump right over top of Banff. And so, they – and Jasper, being farther away, actually worked better in a lot of cases. The same from the backcountry in Jasper, they could actually talk to Banff sometimes better than they could to Jasper themselves, just due to the atmospherics and the frequencies they were using.

Knox: That technology isn't in place at all now?

Visser: We use it religiously up north. In the Far North and the Arctic. Yep. We use a lot of it.

[00:13:22]

Knox: Single-sideband radio?

Visser: Single-sideband. You bet. It's great.

Knox: And then, you were installing repeaters in the backcountry. So I know here in Waterton Lakes, we have the repeater on Crandell. In Banff National Park, what was the first repeater that was put in, do you know?

Visser: Well, the first one actually that you could call a mountaintop was actually at Sulphur Mountain, where they had the observatory [Sulphur Mountain Cosmic Ray Station now a National Historic Site]. And this is going back probably – oh, that would be into the '70s. But again, there was power there. We had a generator, but there was also power. So in case our generator packed up, we could also run it off the AC power from the gondola and all that stuff that was up there. But Parks Canada's first true mountaintop repeater was on Mount Stephen in Yoho Park. And that was installed in 1975. That was before my time.

Knox: Were the park wardens using hand held radios in the backcountry reliant on the Mount Stephen repeater?

Visser: Correct.

Knox: And they would have reasonable coverage through Yoho National Park?

Visser: They had probably 80 percent coverage in Yoho Park. And before, when they had the highways repeaters – so there's three of them in the park, before they moved to Mount Stephen – and those would have probably given 15 percent, maybe 20 percent [radio coverage]. So we went from 15 to 20 percent up to 80 percent. And the site at Mount Stephen was actually one of the first mountaintop repeater sites anywhere in Canada. So that's…

Knox: Interesting.

Visser: Yeah, it's very cool.

Knox: And of course it was then that access evolved with the use of helicopters.

Visser: Correct. And also the advent of transistors and microprocessors. That [in turn] allowed the current draw [on the batteries] to be lower, so therefore, you could run the repeater at remote sites. And back in those days, we actually used caustic potash batteries. These are 1.2 volt – like a big D-cell.

[00:15:40]

Knox: Yes.

Visser: And we would have probably 30 or 40 [batteries] on site. And that would run the repeater for maybe two years. And then, we'd have to take all of those batteries out and replace them. And those were still in place when I started in 1982. We didn't convert to solar [power] probably until early '90s.

Knox: And through the evolution, then, since then, with solar, to charge those batteries, have you seen big changes? Is it similar for the last couple of decades? And does it work well?

Visser: It works extremely well. Originally, we were using nickel-cadmium batteries, which work really well in cold weather. And the only downside with those batteries is disposal – it's a real issue. And the cost is extremely high. So what we have done over the last ten years is we've gone to essentially an industrial lead-acid battery, very similar to what you'd use in your car, but the plates are much, much thicker, and they don't warp in the cold and the hot [weather]. And our cost on those batteries is probably 20 percent of what it would cost for a NiCad battery.

So the costs have come down considerably. The solar panels themselves are probably three to four times more efficient than when we started. Originally, when we started using solar, it was not uncommon by February that the site could go down because the batteries were depleted because we weren't getting enough charge. So we'd have to go up there with a big generator, charge the batteries, clean the panels off. But we haven't had to do that for two years now, so we're getting better. We're getting it right.

Knox: So from the roadside radio repeater that required propane to power it, to a mountaintop with batteries that were pretty big and bulky, to now batteries that are more durable, long-lasting, solar-powered – what are the changes now that you see?

Visser: Oh, battery technology is going to improve. They're working on a number of different technologies. And I could see the battery supply – the physical size of it – going down. You know, from what we have now, within the next five years, it'll be half – half the physical size. And in another five years, it'll probably be a quarter the physical size. And what that allows you to do, of course, is you can add more equipment, do all kinds of interesting and neat things that we just can't do right now – sending data, this kind of stuff. It's not really designed for that. It would be just – too much current draw. But I could see in another five years, you know, you'd be able to get all your internet, everything, from the backcountry, if you wanted. That would be – that's all becoming feasible. I'm not sure whether that's a good thing or not (laughing), but…

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Knox: Yes. And with these batteries, they're located in some of the harshest conditions on the planet – high elevation, extreme cold, high latitude, of course. There must be great interest from manufacturers and providers as to how they work and…

Visser: A lot of the manufacturers have actually done a lot of their own testing, especially on the Ni-Cad side. You know, they've had proven systems

in for 30 years, and that's not really a big issue. The newer technologies, those have yet to be proven in cold temperatures and stuff, especially at high altitudes. So we're going to wait and see. We're definitely not going to convert completely, but we certainly would be looking at some test sites to see how they work. And you know, big cost, of course, is transport. If we can get a battery that only weighs five pounds instead of 80 pounds, that's a lot less cost for us to bring it up with a helicopter. And you know, when you're looking at, say, $2,000 an hour with a helicopter, just to transport the batteries up could be 10 to 20,000 dollars. If we can cut that down to $2,000, that's a huge savings.

Knox: And in a park like Ivvavik in the northern Yukon, up against the Arctic Ocean there and the Alaska border, communication up there in that park for park personnel on the ground, how does it compare to a park like Waterton Lakes, as far as area that's covered by radio?

Visser: Most of Ivvavik itself is covered. They have very comparable coverage actually. Some of the parks further north, that would not be the case. Typically, in those parks, what we would look at is the areas that they typically are working in, and their main base camps that we get covered. But some of the peripheral stuff wouldn't be, just because of the physical size of some of these new parks. They're huge. And to cover it all would cost, you know, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars, where if we can cover 90 percent of what they need for, you know, a quarter of that then… That's the financial limitations we have to work with.

Knox: And in areas of those remote parks where there isn't coverage, they have access to the satellite...

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Visser: Typically satellite phones. But see, the farther north you get, the more problematic that is. As the satellites circle, you don't always have communications. So you may have four to eight minutes of communications, and then you have no communications for another four minutes. So that can be a bit of an issue. Again, most of the people that are up there are very familiar with the environment. So they don't typically make the same mistakes as people down south do. You know, they're a little more self- reliant, which – you know, knock on wood, so far. We haven't had too many serious issues.

Knox: And with satellite technology, it's evolving as well, of course, and quickly.

Visser: You bet.

Knox: And has it impacted the need, or has it reduced the need, for coverage and costs associated with radios and repeaters?

Visser: I think to a certain degree, it will. I think there are certainly parks, especially in the Far North, where we only have one or two staff that only go up there for a few months during the summer. In some of those situations, what we've been doing is, we'll put in a portable repeater that they can actually install themselves. That'll give the coverage locally for their scientists and other staff that are working. And then, they'll have a satellite phone for all of their major communications down south.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: So for the local work area, we'll have a portable repeater. And basically, they put it up at the beginning of the year and take it down [at the end of the field season]. And given that we get 24-hour sunlight, we don't need much battery or anything else up there for that duration of work.

Knox: And the new parks that have recently been established, they will see radio communications come in to them, like you're saying, at some locations, where they're needed.

Visser: You bet. Yes, they will. We just had an email just the other day from [Ukkusiksalik]. And I can't pronounce the name of the new park, but it's not that far from Repulse Bay. And they're looking at trying just something to give them some communications to Repulse.

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Knox: Yes.

Visser: So that's one of the things we'll be looking at in the next couple of weeks, just to see what's feasible, what the costs are, and you know, we'll let them make a decision at that point. But some of these parks don't have a real management plan yet as to what it is they're going to be doing, how many staff they're going to have. So this is an always evolving process.

Knox: So you've visited parks then, as well, in the east?

Visser: You bet. Yes. I've visited every park in the east.

Knox: Oh, good for you.

Visser: I've been very lucky. Places like Cape Breton where they do have cell coverage and that type of stuff around the major towns. But once you get a little bit further north into the proper area of the park, there is no cell coverage. You know, they're really not that advanced in that area. And they have a big push in those areas now for fiber [optical fiber cable] and cell coverage and stuff. And it will come, it's just that the volume is not there, so it's a slow process. Out here it'd be uncommon not to have cell coverage. But in a lot of areas, that's not the case. Even in Kejimkujik, which is in the middle of Nova Scotia, once you get off the highway, there is no cell coverage, which is crazy, because you're

only two hours from Halifax. But that's the reality. Most of the places where parks are, it's nature. That's what it is, and a lot of the infrastructure is just not there.

Knox: Yes. Well, I would hazard a guess then Martin, that perhaps of all Parks Canada employees, you have worked in more parks than any other employee.

Visser: Yep, I have been to more places than Alan Latourelle [former Director General of Parks Canada] (laughing). Yeah, we actually talked about that, because I met him in Torngat a few years ago.

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Knox: You've visited 36 of the 40-some parks.

Visser: Yeah. I was two ahead of him at that point.

Knox: And while there you are putting in hundreds of hours of field time, in some cases.

Visser: That's right. Absolutely. We're going actually there this summer, to Torngat, and we're actually going to – we're putting in a satellite link down south. And the reason for it is that park is actually – it's a co-managed park, and they do a lot of training with kids. One of their programs is bringing in about 30 mostly Inuit children [Kangidluasuk Student Program].

Knox: Yes. Wonderful.

Visser: And they bring them up there for anywhere from one to four weeks. And it's quite a thing. It's absolutely amazing to watch these kids. And yeah. For what they do, is they take away the cell phones, take away all of the toys, and try to get them back to nature. And it's quite something.

Knox: And in Torngat, would there be coverage, 100 percent, throughout the park?

Visser: Definitely coverage within the areas that the scientists and the people are working, for sure. But the outer edges, not so much. But they have very little traffic back there. You might have one or two people that may go into areas that do not have radio coverage, but that would be odd. It wouldn't happen very often.

Knox: And with the establishment of new parks in the system, Martin, you then would be the staff who would be setting up of the [radio communications].

Visser: That's correct. Typically, what they would do is they would contact us. We'd have a look at the maps and get the information from them as to what areas they want covered, where they're going to have a base station, what it is they actually need, how long they're going to be there.

And from that, we can formulate some general costs. And they would put that into their plan. And from there, we would proceed. Typically, it would be a year or two years later that we would put in some infrastructure. It may be a simple base station. It could be a simple repeater. Sometimes just a single-sideband antenna. Sometimes it's not too extensive, but in Ukkusiksalik, by Wager Bay, when they put that in, we put in five repeater sites within two years of establishing the park. That was quite a project.

[00:28:19]

Knox: Were you there in the [1984] establishment of Ivvavik [National Park], in its communications?

Visser: No, that was just before my time. Bill Dolan was the guy in charge of that.

Knox: And how do you set it up …looking at the topography and a visual of the land as far as [coverage]?

Visser: Yeah, typically, we get what areas they want covered and they'll give us some latitude, longitude, this kind of information. And from there, we can figure out, if we put a repeater on this mountain for example, we can have this kind of coverage. And to get it linked to another repeater, you know, we have to look at what options are available. And typically, we would have to go there, fly around, and check the mountaintop sites. You know, is it big enough to put a shelter? Is it big enough to put a tower? You know, can we safely land? All these factors. And then, we'll go back to the office, put together a cost estimate, and go from there.

Knox: And has your family missed you at times, being away?

Visser: Absolutely. That's the hardest part.

Knox: For sometimes up to a month away, I'm sure. Somewhere…

Visser: Typically, from May all the way through until the end of September, I would typically be gone two weeks and maybe home a week. And sometimes, you get delayed, and you're gone for three weeks. You come home, take your stuff out of your suitcase, and pack some more stuff, and you're gone the next day. So yeah. It's very difficult on the family.

Knox: Yes. But what an interesting career [it has been for you].

Visser: Absolutely.

Knox: Having visited coast to coast to coast – 36 parks.

Visser: Yes. It's the best job anybody could ever have.

[00:30:19]

Knox: It doesn't come without its hazards though.

Visser: You bet.

Knox: You're traveling to these remote locations by all kinds of means – helicopter and boat …and have you accessed any sites on horseback?

Visser: I haven't done the horseback thing (laughing). But certainly everything else.

Knox: By snowmobile?

Visser: Snowmobile, and mostly helicopter. That's the vast majority of it. There's a few sites we can drive to. But yeah, mostly helicopter.

Knox: And highlights of the places you have worked …anything come to mind that stands out as far as these visits to far and away parks?

Visser: Oh, they're all highlights. There is no place that I could say that I really don't like. It's – you know, the scenery is absolutely amazing, without a doubt. Even places like Nahanni which have been in existence for – gosh, since the '70s. We were out at one of the repeater sites probably 10 years ago, and our helicopter got delayed. So we're sitting there and looking at the ground, and we're finding fossils. I mean, how crazy is that?! You know. It's just stuff like that, that comes up all the time. You know, we have opportunities to see things like tufa mounds. And you know, like, it's just, everything is there.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: And every place is different, but they're all unique. They're all absolutely amazing.

[00:31:57]

Knox: And the people that work and live in those places. You've met some characters?

Visser: Oh, we've met all kinds of crazy people. Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

Knox: Yes. And in the north, First Nations who have lived …grown up on the land there, they are interested to see the technology that you have and that you put in place?

Visser: Yeah, they are. Some of them are a little cautious because we – we're new. But I find, like, once we're out in the field with them, they come around pretty quickly. And you know, I've established relationships with hundreds of people. I was just actually telling Bob [Robert Howard] the other day – I was in Iqaluit last year and this fellah that I

had met a few years before, he comes running over and gives me a big hug, and says (laughing), "Welcome home! Welcome home!"

Knox: Very good.

Visser: So that's the kind – they're very open people.

Knox: Nice. Yes.

Visser: You know? And it is just absolutely wonderful. You go into the co-op that, you know, in Pond Inlet …you haven't been there for two or three years. And you know, "Oh hi, how are you doing?" You know, they're very friendly people.

Knox: People recognizing you from…

Visser: Yeah. They recognize you right away. And yeah, it's great.

Knox: And you understand the importance of communications – the efficiencies and the safety. It's a job that's very important in the system [of National Parks].

Visser: It is. Absolutely. Reliability is the big thing. The systems have to be reliable. And so far, I think we've a pretty good track record on that. Some of the stuff up north, you really have to take in account the environment. The environment is so harsh. And you know, stuff down here – we may be able to get away with a 2-inch piece of pipe to mount something. In some of the areas up north, we have to go to 3½-inch, just because of the cold and the winds and just – it's just extremes of everything. Because we don't get there that often, what we put in really has to be overbuilt, almost. Like, it has to last. And that's one of the challenges, is getting the stuff up there and making sure what you have is the right stuff.

[00:34:25]

Knox: Yes.

Visser: So that's a bit of a challenge.

Knox: And traveling by helicopters and into these remote locations and such – touchwood – have you had any near misses?

Visser: I've had numerous near misses. Yeah.

Knox: And what can bring that on, Martin? I suppose any number of…

Visser: Yeah, typically it's pilot error.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: What happens is, especially in the Far North, it's not uncommon to push the envelope as far as the work day goes. So if we work 14-hour days you know, the pilot gets tired, we get tired, we make mistakes, they make mistakes. We've thundered in a couple of times now. And yeah, so far, nothing major [has happened] that we couldn't get the machine fixed. But yeah, there's been a few bloody noses (laughing), and…

Knox: Have you had to sit and wait?

Visser: Oh yes. That happens too. I've only actually been stuck a couple of times overnight. So that's great. I've had to walk off of a site before, and you know, when you look at the map and you figure out, okay, I've got to walk down this side of the glacier. Okay. That's not very far. And three hours later, you're still walking. Things are much bigger than you think they are. So it can be a challenge.

Knox: And when overnight, do you remember how breakfast was that morning (laughing)? Or did you have provisions enough with you?

Visser: We had enough. We'd typically take enough food. We'll bring some mixed nuts and this kind of stuff. And there's typically lots of snow for water (laughing). And we normally like to have a little heater of some kind, but it's very limited. So we'd have maybe an hour's worth of heat, so you want to use that to melt your water. You've got to really think about it. You know, a person can last two or three days without too much stuff, really. And it's just the cold. The cold is the problem.

[00:36:20]

Knox: And here in Waterton, we have a repeater on Mount Crandell, and that can be a pretty unforgiving environment up there.

Visser: It can.

Knox: You've been up to it many times over the years…

Visser: Yep.

Knox: Servicing that repeater. Any times where you've ever had to walk off Mount Crandell?

Visser: I never had to walk off, but a few years ago, when we were taking off, the helicopter flamed out. So we had to do an auto-rotation down to the golf course (laughing). So that was kind of an interesting experience.

Knox: And did it hit pretty hard?

Visser: It hardly hit at all! It was absolutely amazing! The pilot was just in so much control of it, he just basically got on there and says, "Well, we flamed out and she won't restart." Says, "I'm going to do an auto-rotation. It's not a big deal. You won't know the difference." And it was just as smooth as silk. Unbelievable.

Knox: Interesting.

Visser: I was quite impressed.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: And first thing he did when he landed, he says, “Are you all right?” (laughing) “Yes, I’m fine.” He says, “That’s good.” (laughing) But that’s experience, right?

Knox: Sure.

Visser: The pilot was extremely experienced. And it – just for some reason, it flamed out, and it just wouldn’t re-light.

[00:37:55]

Knox: At those high repeater stations, up on the mountains, I’m sure you might have had an experience with lightning.

Visser: Yes, lots of times, actually. One of the things that comes to mind is, I was up there with the RCMP on Mount Shanks [in Kootenay National Park], a number of years ago now. And you could feel tingling in the air. It’s a very, very strange sensation. And I’m talking with one of their techs, and he had glasses on. And all of a sudden, I could see an arc between the two glasses, right through his nose (laughing).

Knox: My goodness.

Visser: Yeah. So he throws his glasses off and jumps to the ground (laughing), because that really hurt. “What the heck happened?” It was lightning. It had burned a hole right through his nose!

Knox: Unbelievable.

Visser: Yeah. It was the strangest thing, but you could feel it on your hand, and you can actually taste the ozone in the air! It was just unbelievable! And we’ve had a number of situations – like now that we know better, as soon as we can feel that and taste it and smell it, we get down as close to the ground as possible so that, hopefully, nobody gets hit. We had to actually go through that once to see what it was really all about (laughing).

Knox: On Mount Shanks. Where is it located?

Visser: It’s in Kootenay Park. It’s at the northern end of Kootenay Park. It’s probably about six miles from Sunshine Ski Village, and maybe 11 miles from Banff town site.

Knox: And with the 100-plus repeaters, many at remote locations like that, lightning is a hazard that’s common to them all?

Visser: Oh, typically, yes. We would probably on average lose three or four antennas every year that we need to go up and replace. They get hit by lightning. And sometimes, it's just the antenna. But a lot of times, it'll take the equipment out as well. There's a lot of maintenance involved.

[00:39:49]

Knox: Let's come back to that, regards the damage that a storm will do. But when you were up on Shanks that day, was there indication that you were in that sort of danger?

Visser: No, there was actually just one fairly dark cloud, and it seemed to be two or three miles away. So we really didn't anticipate any lightning or anything else. It was just, as I say, a really strange situation. And you know, we should have known as soon as – you could almost – you could hear it as well. There was a sort of a high pitched squeal. And you know, both of us were looking at each other going, what's that? What's that noise? And all of a sudden, ZAP (laughing)!

Knox: And was that lightning strike followed then by a storm?

Visser: No, we had no lightning strike, per se. It was just enough energized energy in the air, that it starting dissipating through whatever was closest. It just happened to be his metal frame glasses.

Knox: So that incident occurred and then you just carried on.

Visser: We carried on.

Knox: But yet, you saw arcing…

Visser: Yeah, a nice blue arc! And he actually physically had a hole through the bridge of his nose!

Knox: And it was such that he was able to carry on?

Visser: Well, we'd just finished off the job we were doing. It was just a half an hour, and then he drove to the Invermere Hospital. And there was nothing they could do for him. It was basically sealed. It was crazy.

Knox: Have you heard stories of other coworkers ever injured?

Visser: No co-workers ever been injured. But like I say, it happens lots of times to golfers and stuff [who], get hit. And then, people hiking, actually. There's a fair amount of them that actually do get hit. It's a hazard of the job (laughing).

Knox: Mount Shanks – is that the only incident that you can remember then, that lightning coming close to striking you?

[00:41:33]

Visser: Well, we've been on other sites that haven't had a direct hit, but there was lightning definitely close in the area. And we've had to go down the edge a bit – you know, maybe a hundred feet, and just wait it out below the peak, and once it's past, and continue on with what we were doing.

Knox: So you've returned to repeater sites many times, probably to assess the damage that a lightning storm would have done. Are there preventative measures that you take?

Visser: Oh, we have lightning protection on there, but you know, you get hit with a big lightning strike, it doesn't matter what you have. It just takes everything out, along with the lightning protection. It just goes up in smoke, and everything is black and charred.

Knox: Yes. Like physical damage…

Visser: Oh, yeah. Just physically, you can see things blown apart. Like it sometimes – some of the equipment, it's bolted into the rack. And we've had equipment actually blown right out of the rack, and the bolts broken right off.

Knox: Much more damage than a marmot would do.

Visser: Oh, yes.

Knox: Wow.

Visser: That typically only happens maybe once or twice a year. But it definitely happens.

Knox: Most interesting. You mentioned the helicopter and lightning and wildlife. But then there is the weather …the wind. But you assess the conditions of the day?

Visser: Oh, we do. But sometimes you say, it's going to be a pretty good day and you get up there and then things change fairly rapidly. It's not uncommon that clouds will come in and we'll be there for an extra four or five hours, waiting for the clouds to clear. It's not a huge issue if you have the helicopter with you, because then all you need is that two minute window to get out. But if the helicopter has gone down below because the winds are too high or [the pilot is] not comfortable, then there's a good chance that you could get stuck for a long period of time.

[00:43:31]

Knox: You mentioned accessing sites with snowmobile. Any major distances ever, or was it pretty straightforward?

Visser: No. It was pretty straightforward, nothing too fancy there. I went out a few years ago with Bob [Howard], and we were trying to load [the snowmobile] onto the truck, and he got the reverse and forward mixed up (laughing). He ended up going through the windshield on the

snowmobile, but that was just a fluke thing. It was kind of a funny thing, actually. We had a big chuckle over it and we had to run down to Swift Current and go and get a new windshield for the snowmobile, but… (laughing)

Knox: Accidents on the tailgate.

Visser: Yeah, exactly.

Knox: That can happen. And wildlife …any encounters with bears?

Visser: Yes, but we've seen them coming.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: So our little policy, our little internal policy, is when wildlife is coming, we just leave. We just basically close the door and call it a day, and we'll come back the next day and do [the job]. It's their place too, so…

Knox: And incidental to your work, you've probably seen some – just nice observations of bears…

Visser: Oh, beautiful. We were sitting at Rabbit Kettle Cabin in Nahanni last year. And we just got in to the cabin about 6:30, and had taken the boards off the windows and were just sitting down, having a cup of coffee, and just looked out the window, and there's a big brown bear, right there, you know, within 10 feet of us.

Knox: Very nice.

Visser: And of course, we're going, oh, no (laughing). Everything we have is in the helicopter still. But we just kind of yelled at it and it just…

Knox: Ambled off.

Visser: Slowly moseyed off.

[00:45:19]

Knox: Very good.

Visser: But porcupines and all kinds of neat things like that.

Knox: Yes. And speaking of porcupines – doing damage to repeater sites. Have you seen, related to wildlife, issues with [wildlife]?

Visser: Just like [damage] like marmots do.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: So when we have sites where we have [marmots], we need to put tin on everything, just to kind of keep them at bay. But it's very few sites. Probably of all the sites, – I think we have 106 repeater sites – we only

run into that, I think, at two or three sites. So we're typically up much higher than they want to be. So it's normally not an issue.

Knox: And you're accessing these very remote sites. I can imagine that at some point, you arrived on site, and did you ever forget the wrench that you needed? That kind of thing happen, ever?

Visser: Not that I would ever admit (laughing). Actually, the very first job I went to, and when I started in Parks in 1982 – I started, I think, it was on a Tuesday morning. And the guy was working in the shop with you, and he says, "Well, we have to go to Yoho." I said, "Okay. That's cool." And he says, "You'll never believe why we have to go." And I said, "Well, repeaters down." And he says, "Yes, it is." And he says, "You know why it's down? 'Cause we forgot to turn it on when we left the building (laughing)."

Knox: And Martin, with your work, you've carried a camera.

Visser: I have so.

Knox: And amassed quite a collection of photos from all…

Visser: Yes, I do. Back in the beginning, of course, it wasn't digital. So they're just pictures. I've got them all over the place. I do have to organize and get them scanned. But back in those days, you know, film cost a lot of money.

[00:47:20]

Knox: Yes.

Visser: I didn't take anywhere near as many pictures as I should have. And one of the things that I've learned over the years is you have to take pictures of people as well.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: I have a lot of equipment and site pictures, but no people, you know? And that was very foolish. I learned that over the years, you've got to get people in there. It gives perspective. It gives just a whole lot more meaning to everything.

Knox: And pictures – you were mentioning of the placement of the Mount Stephen repeater. Guys up there physically mixing cement or…

Visser: Yes. They would haul it up in the helicopter and physically, on site, they were mixing cement to pour the base. And like I say, they were up there for three days. And you could just see from the beginning pictures to the end, during and while they were up there, it was snowing, and just horrible conditions. Absolutely amazing.

Knox: A predecessor of yours took those photos?

Visser: That's correct.

Knox: On Mount Stephen.

Visser: That's correct.

Knox: Well, your collection sounds to be a fantastic thing to put together, digitally, someday. And…

Visser: Oh, yeah.

Knox: Is a real record of the communications in national parks.

Visser: Like I say, I have hundreds and hundreds of pictures. A lot of them are from the '50s through the early '80s. Just hundreds and hundreds of pictures. I've been diligently trying to mark on the back of them when and where.

Knox: Valuable information.

Visser: It is. It'll take me a long time to go through and catalog all that stuff and scan it.

[00:48:59]

Knox: Well, I'd love to see the collection digitized someday. I'll have to work with you on that.

Visser: You bet. That'd be great.

Knox: And other incidents or stories that you can reflect on that would be of interest for our oral history? Let's speak about your work right today here in Waterton. You're down [here] for three days.

Visser: Correct.

Knox: You and Bob [Howard]. And this is a pretty routine visit to Waterton?

Visser: It is. This is very routine. Essentially what we're doing, we're just programming the portable and mobile radio equipment that's on – you know, that the users use. And then, we're going to actually just modify one of the existing repeater sites. We're just adding another repeater to it so that we'll have a nice coverage into the backcountry areas. And we're going to just upgrade a link over to our other existing site, just to give a little bit clearer communications. This is pretty routine. This is a small job. This is, you know, essentially four days, whereas some of the stuff we do up north, we might be gone for two or three weeks.

Knox: And in Waterton here, we have the repeater on Crandell, and a booster repeater on Blakiston.

Visser: Blakiston. Correct.

Knox: And do we share the repeater with another agency on Crandell?

Visser: No, on Crandell, there's also an RCMP repeater that's on there. Essentially, we use the same antenna, the same power supply, but the actual frequencies – our Parks Canada and then they have the RCMP. Correct.

Knox: Yes. And is that similar with other repeaters in the park system where…

Visser: We do that on a number of sites. Probably, oh, 20 percent of our sites, we share with somebody. It may not be RCMP. It could be DFO [Department of Fisheries and Oceans]. It could be – you know, OPP [Ontario Provincial Police], or Quebec – Certe Quebec. Yeah, it could be all kinds of people. It's just a kind of cost-sharing thing. We try to do it as much as possible. Better to have one tower than two separate towers. It looks better. It keeps the cost down.

[00:51:16]

Knox: And tomorrow, the weather is such that you'll likely fly?

Visser: We're hoping to.

Knox: And it's just, you're waiting for the winds to drop?

Visser: We're waiting for the winds to drop down. Right now, they're a little bit too nasty, so…

Knox: And on Crandell Mountain, there's the repeater and just 100 metres or less to the north of a helicopter pad.

Visser: Correct. Typically, we can only use that every second time. It's typically too windy there, so normally, we'll actually land down below, probably 500 - 600 metres away, and then we'll hike up the last bit. It's just that it's a better place to land, it's safer for everybody, and exercise is good.

Knox: The portable repeater, Martin, that you've brought down to Waterton Park – the first time that our group here has ever had that component of the communication system. Can you tell us a little bit about its attributes and its value – where it might be used and where similar setups have been used?

Visser: You bet. The need for that is more for emergency situations, especially fire. A lot of times what happens is we'll get a fire somewhere in a semi-remote location. And for the fire crews to be able to communicate, amongst themselves, as well as with the rest of the park – typically, they're so busy that it ties up the whole repeater system. So by having a portable, we can actually keep the fire operations [communications] amongst themselves. And typically, only the fire operations officer would communicate on the main park repeater system. That keeps the traffic down to something reasonable.

And also, when the guys are working on the fire line, and other users are working on the same repeater, the guys on the fire line tend to either turn their radio down or off, because it's so annoying for them, and they could really miss something crucial – you know, if the fire has changed direction. And without that communications, they could be caught. So that's the main reason we actually built this one was strictly for fire, but I mean, it could be used for rescues, everything else. But that was the idea behind it – so that these guys, that radio channel would be theirs alone. And if anything happens, they'd be able to keep up with it, as things develop and change.

Knox: Yes. Here in Waterton – June, July, August, and September – we're a very busy park, and lots of radio traffic. And you get a fire into the mix of all of that, or a rescue that spans a few days, that then gives it its own devoted channel.

[00:54:07]

Visser: It does. And like I say, the main purpose behind it is so that the guys on the fire line, have that channel. So any radio traffic on that channel, they know it's for them, and it's time to pay attention, just in case – like things change all the time. The fire direction changes, and we don't want anybody getting caught and getting hurt.

Knox: Yes. I'm sure it will be used in Waterton …a very valuable resource.

Visser: Actually, the national fire guys, as well, are pretty keen on seeing how this works, what the physical size [is] and stuff. When we designed this thing, we actually designed this so it'll actually fit in the back seat of a helicopter. So one person and the pilot can actually set this up and, you know, 10 minutes on site, and they have their own dedicated channel to do things.

Knox: Are there other sites in the system where it's already been used? Or do you have a few of them deployed?

Visser: We've had some previously, but they were much larger, and you almost had to sling it in with the helicopter. And it would take a half an hour to set up, which doesn't sound like a lot of time, but it is. And just transporting it from, say, a central storage to some remote park – because of the bulky size, you needed a full-sized pickup. And it was administratively, just a huge burden. This can, essentially, fit in a car if you had to, and can have it pretty well anywhere you want within hours.

Knox: Wonderful. So Waterton …we're the trial park?

Visser: You're the trial park.

Knox: Excellent. And you and your team built this?

Visser: Yes. We built it from scratch and…

[00:55:43]

Knox: Wonderful.

Visser: We went and, like I say, measured the helicopter to make sure everything is going to fit.

Knox: Oh, great.

Visser: I think it's going to work out extremely well for them.

Knox: In Waterton, how many hand held radios do we have and how many truck mobile radios?

Visser: Waterton's actually a very small park, but I think you have somewhere upwards of 130 portables, and I think there's 31 mobile radios. And this is a small park. In something like Banff or Jasper they would probably have seven or eight times as many, especially on the portable side, for sure, there'd be that many extra.

Knox: Yes. It's quite a program within Parks Canada.

Visser: It is. Across the country, we have probably around 3,800 radios, either portable or mobile. And like I say, 106 repeater sites, and numerous base stations, and all kinds of peripheral stuff.

Knox: Yes. Facilitating a lot of important business, a lot of emergency business.

Visser: You bet.

Knox: Day-to-day operation of the park. It can't be done without that communication.

Visser: Correct.

Knox: Yeah. 3,800.

Visser: 3,800 …it's a lot of radios.

[00:57:03]

Knox: We've spoken about the changes in technology, and it really was something through the span of your career.

Visser: Oh, it was. I started working on tube-type equipment. Most people now don't even know what that is. And they generated a lot of heat, took a lot of power. And reliability has improved so much.

Knox: And physically, in '82, rolling up the copper wire that connected phones. Phones connecting the backcountry cabins.

Visser: Yep. Yep.

Knox: Interesting system, but communications that have been in place since the early 1900s, really.

Visser: That's correct. And then, like even the single-sideband – we've got rid of most of that in the mountain parks here, but we rely on it a lot up north. Anything north of 60, we have still quite a bit of it. And it covers large areas. It's not always reliable, and you may not be able to talk to exactly who you want to talk to, but you'll probably be able to talk to somebody.

Knox: Yes. Sure.

Visser: There's quite a community up there. So if you need [something], you know, you're in trouble, and anybody who hears you, they're going to help you, regardless of where they're from and who they belong to, they will help you.

Knox: And in layman's terms, the single-sideband then, it involves an antenna?

Visser: A long wire antenna. It's horizontal. Typically, it'll be 50, 60 feet long, and we'll mount that in between two towers. Of course, in the Far North, you have no trees, so you need to install some kind of a tower. And the further off the ground it gets, the better the propagation is. But in some cases, we're only 10, 15 feet off the ground.

Knox: And it's good for, in the north, for hundreds of miles?

Visser: It can be hundreds of miles. But unfortunately, if you want to talk to someone 10 miles away, you probably can't, because you're shooting over the top of them.

Knox: Interesting.

Visser: So it has limitations. The system itself is reliable, but you're not necessarily going to talk to who you want to talk to. So that's one of the downsides to it. But it is reliable. It does work. But it's very subject to weather conditions. Solar flares really make a mess of it. If you get solar [flares], it's not impossible to talk from the real Far North to Jasper or Banff better than you can to your office, which is 100 miles away.

[00:59:33]

Knox: Yes.

Visser: You know, so crazy things happen sometimes. Or you know, you'll get a shot down to South America.

Knox: Interesting.

Visser: Yeah, it is. But it works. And out there, most of the people who live off the land use single-sideband. And typically, the parks equipped with it also have those frequencies in there. They have community frequencies

and we make sure we have those. So worst case scenario, we can call somebody, or actually pick up other people that are in trouble and help them out.

Knox: And on the table, Martin, in front of us, we have the two radios that span the length of time that I've been with Parks, since the trail crew in Yoho in the mid-80s, carrying a box radio like pictured there.

Visser: The lunchbox radio. Yep.

Knox: And D-cell batteries in it.

Visser: D-cell batteries to power it. Correct.

Knox: A dozen or so of them. And it's about, you know, 10 by 20 by 15 centimeters and weighs [2 kilos], and then, the little handheld radio that we use today, the Motorola…

Visser: XPR 7550. I think it weighs like 10 ounces. It has 1,000 channels where your PT radio [Motorola PT500 *Handie-Talkie* portable "lunchbox" FM radio] would have two or three channels, or four channels, if you're really lucky. And you know, again, the good thing with the PT is the batteries would probably last you two weeks, whereas with the newer radio, the battery may last two days. So you know, again, it's one of these things you have to get used to. You need to – if you're not using your radio, you can turn it off. You know, extend the life. Typically, people aren't in the backcountry for extremely long periods of time, so…

Knox: Yes.

[01:01:24]

Visser: And the nice thing with a Lithium-ion battery on that [Motorola XPR 7550], it's so light, you can carry a spare.

Knox: Yes. And is there technology available to charge that battery in the backcountry?

Visser: Oh, for sure. Most – like in the north especially, where we use these at every cabin, we have a solar panel and a charger to charge up the batteries and stuff. We do that a lot.

Knox: The evolution of the radios there, but you'll see on the old box radio – the lunchbox radio – the big phone receiver and a heavy-duty cord. I'm glad that radio is kept for posterity.

Visser: Oh, it is. And the thing is, that lunchbox radio, at the time when they purchased that, that was probably close to $5,000.

Knox: Yes.

Visser: And this fancy radio, state-of-the-art, is in the $800 price range. So costs have come down considerably. Weight, size – everything has come down. Capacity [has gone up]. On the newer radio, you can send digital information. You can actually text with it. You could do all kinds of crazy things so that – whereas the old one, you could just talk. That's it. No, things are coming along well. And like I say, I fully expect, within a few years, the battery technology on these is going to be upgraded considerably, and that portable is probably going to last you five or six days on a single charge. So I see that coming.

Knox: And this has Bluetooth technology as well.

Visser: Correct. Exactly. So you can pair it with your Bluetooth headset or whatever you want to do.

Knox: For helicopter sling rescue work.

Visser: That kind of stuff. You bet.

[01:03:07]

Knox: And the technologies pretty good. I haven't used it much, but it – it works.

Visser: It works well.

Knox: Another thing, Martin, I wanted to ask you was about just passing the torch to the next group that will come along in your role. Any words of wisdom or advice?

Visser: Patience. You've got to have patience. Things evolve all the time, so you can't [stay] in one mindset and say, this is the way we're going to do it. Because every park is a little bit different. The users are all a little bit different and technologies are changing all the time. So you've got to be flexible. And the greatest ideas can come from the strangest of places. You know there's lots of people out there that have just absolutely great ideas. And you know, like when we put in a repeater site, the very first thing that we do when we've got it done and we're happy with it, we look back and say, okay, what mistakes did we make? How could we have done this better? And we try to incorporate that [the next time].

And then, we look at what other people have done. And you know, we say, that's not a bad idea. And we try to incorporate as much – and other people do that too. They look at our stuff and say, hey, that's not bad. And so, you got to be open and flexible. That's the key. You know, you're going to get stuck in places for sometimes long periods of time. You just got to be patient. Can't get too excited, because it'll drive you crazy (laughing).

Knox: No, that's all good advice. I can only imagine you go to a northern park where you're fogged in or the weather just doesn't cooperate.

Visser: Yeah. I've been stuck in Pangnirtung [Nunavut] for seven days, waiting to get out. And you know, you can hear the plane flying over twice a day. Can't land. But you know, you just don't get too excited about it. You have no control over it. It's one of those things. That's the way it is.

Knox: So you've gone to places where you literally couldn't get in to do the work?

Visser: Oh, yeah. A few years ago when we were up in Pangnirtung, our job was going to be about 6 days, and 22 days later, I got home.

Knox: Your wife must have patience too.

Visser: Oh yeah. Absolutely. I mean, it's like, you know, I would call and say, well, we're not getting out today and tomorrow doesn't look good either, so I'll call you in two days. So no, they have to have patience, especially when they have other things going on and they want to do this or they want to do that. I mean, you're not going to be home. It's definitely hard on the spouse.

Knox: Yes. And do you see new staff coming along that are starting into the system? Are there new people in Parks Canada now that are working with the radio coms?

[01:06:22]

Visser: We have a new person [Jefferson Geck] in Calgary. And a lot of it is new to him, and just the whole dealing with people and stuff is a new experience for him. So it's going to take a little while, but you just got to have patience. And you know, you have to kind of live through it a little bit. And then, it's easy to tell somebody just to have patience, but they need to actually do it themselves, and look at some of the challenges that come up. And sometimes, you know, we need to do crazy things, like use our duct tape to hold our antenna on the wall, because that's the only thing you have.

And you know, you got to be imaginative. And that's one thing nice, with the Inuit, when you have a problem, because they're so used to working with so little, they can come up with all kinds of ideas for you. And so, you just got to tap the resources that are out there. And like I say, some of the greatest ideas we've had have come from the most unlikely sources. You know, a janitor or a garbage person will come up with something and say, hey, you know, what about this? You got to keep an open mind and it'll all work out.

Knox: Very good. I know in Waterton, you've always been appreciated. When we hear Martin's coming down, we're appreciative.

Visser: This is a fun place to work. We enjoy this. This is excellent.

Knox: It's a nice site. And the connection, too, with Glacier in Montana and our radios, of course, a program to work with theirs across the border.

Visser: Right.

Knox: So the international communications.

Visser: Yeah. We do the same up in Chilkoot [Chilkoot National Historic Site - 53 km *1890s gold rush trail* from Dyea Alaska to Bennett, British Columbia]. We talk to the U.S. guys there, and we actually have a site that we're sharing with them. And trying to cross the border, of course, is an issue. So what we do is we land just before their site which is still in Canada, and we walk up to their site and give them our stuff. They put it in and we kind of watch them from two feet back, because that's where the border is.

Knox: Very good. Oh, that's fun.

Visser: Yeah. But they're all really good guys. You know, they've been through a lot of the same stuff that we have. They deal with the same kind of environment. And yeah, it all works out good.

Knox: And ahead of you this summer, you have a full plate?

[01:08:39]

Visser: I do. Yes, I'm going from here to Wood Buffalo – or, I'm going to Jasper next week, and then I'm going up to Wood Buffalo. And then this summer, I'm going to Torngat. So I'm looking forward to that. And who knows what else? Oh, Nahanni in June.

Knox: And Torngat National Park – you're visiting it, as well, this summer?

Visser: I'm going there on July 17. We're going to put in a satellite dish, and we're going to have a phone system put in. That park has a fair amount of visitors. And it's a co-managed park with the Labrador Inuit. And what they've set up is a big base camp at Saglek. And they have tourists come in which they provide accommodation for. They have yurts. I think in the typical yurt, there's about eight people. And then, they have executive yurts, which are really nice. And I think that's either two or four people. And they provide all the meals, and they take them out fishing. They take them around to see some of the Inuit areas, where their sacred lands are and this kind of stuff.

So we're putting in a satellite dish so that they can be able to make phone calls and it's also point of sales. They sell merchandise and Parks Canada is involved in that, with the Labrador Inuit. And then, on the other side of Torngat, the Quebec park – there's a Quebec park there – and they're putting in a radio system. This year, they're starting on it, and we'll be involved with some of that, because they want to interconnect the two parks, so that when travelers go from the Quebec

side, they can actually go all the way through, end up in Saglek, and either take a boat or a plane back to wherever they came from.

Knox: Very good.

Visser: But it's all co-managed. So there's going to be essentially two provinces. The Labrador Inuit, the Inuit from Nunavik. So it's going to be kind of four or five partners. So that's going to be quite a challenge to interconnect it, and I think it's great. I think it will all work out quite nicely for them.

Knox: Very good.

Visser: But it's quite a revenue generator. They get a lot of people there. While we were there, just as we were leaving last year, they had 80 guests. And you know, they're only there for the one day, but that's a lot of guests for a place 300 miles from nothing. So it's a lot of logistics.

[01:11:34]

Knox: Yes. Very good. So Martin, you've been at it for 35 years, almost. And you're going to keep working for a while yet, which is wonderful.

Visser: I am. I plan to do this for another couple of years.

Knox: Wonderful.

Visser: That's my thought process at this time. I'm hoping to take the winters off. That's kind of what I want to do.

Knox: Yes. And you've really kept up with the technology and…

Visser: Which is the hardest part. You got to do a lot of reading.

Knox: Good for you.

Visser: Yeah, you got to keep on top of it, because things are changing all the time. And there's more ways to address problems now than there ever was before, so you always want to have the solution.

Knox: Right.

Visser: So that's the hard part: just trying to keep up with everything.

Knox: Yes. Well, your long, long career – obviously, you're the perfect man for the job. And it's been wonderful knowing you over the years, Martin.

Visser: You bet.

Knox: And I'm sure glad you were so keen to sit with me for – here now we've been at it for just over an hour…

Visser: Excellent.

Knox: To talk about this most interesting work with Parks Canada.

Visser: It is. Yeah, like I say, it's the best job I've ever had. And anybody who can get a job like this, yeah, just jump on it. It's absolutely wonderful.

Knox: Marvelous. Well, we'll leave it at that.

Visser: Perfect.

Knox: And thank you very much, Martin.

Visser: Thanks, Edwin.

[End of recorded material 01:13:01]

Photos courtesy of Parks Canada attached – see following pages:

Martin Visser at the Mount Crandell radio repeater site. WLNP, April 7, 2016.

Martin Visser with Becky Mitchell Skinner WLNP April 7, 2016

Martin Visser at Hermit Repeater, Glacier National Park, 2016