

# *Chagos News*

*The Periodical Newsletter of the  
Chagos Conservation Trust*

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## **EDITORIAL**

### **AGM and EGM**

Our Annual General Meeting will be held at 1815 on Thursday 9 September and will be preceded by an Extraordinary General Meeting at 1800. Details are on the back page. The reason for the Extraordinary General Meeting is also on the back page. We hope as many Members as possible will attend. Feel free to bring families and friends. Anthony Crombie, the new Commissioner of the British Indian Ocean Territory, plans to attend the meeting. After the meeting we will have drinks together.

### **Chagos Cruise**

A rare opportunity for members and their friends to visit the Chagos archipelago is envisaged for next year. WEXAS, the prestigious International Travellers' Club (in association with the Chagos Conservation Trust), plans a three week cruise in April 2005 to the Chagos, starting and ending in the Seychelles.

The vessel will be the comfortable "Indian Ocean Explorer" which is well known for its use in filming documentaries, particularly on Aldabra. There will be accommodation for about 14 people on board accompanied by an expert guest lecturer. WEXAS say that the cruise will necessarily be "fairly expensive"; it will go ahead subject to numbers and final Government agreement.

Anyone interested, who would like further, advance details about the cruise should email: [ian.wilson@wexas.com](mailto:ian.wilson@wexas.com).

### **Date**

My apologies for dating the last Chagos News **2003** when I meant **2004**.

### **Peak of Limuria, new, revised, published by CCT. Special prices for members from [genevieveedis@hotmail.com](mailto:genevieveedis@hotmail.com)**

UK members:	£10 + £1.50 p&p = £11.50
UK non members:	£15 + £1.50 p&p = £16.50
European members:	£10 + £3 p&p = £13
European non members:	£15 + £3 p&p = £18
US members:	\$15 + \$7 p&p = \$22
US non members:	\$20 + \$7 p&p = \$27

*John Topp*

## **DIEGO GARCIA'S COMMUNICATIONS ROLE IN WW II**

*Students of DG's history since 1945 know how the island attracted the attention of naval communicators as much as that of air forces in search of staging posts. Few however are aware of the contribution made by DG radio communicators in World War II. Fewer still realise how great a contribution was made by Mauritian amateur radio enthusiasts in the early days of the war. Here, for the first time, Chagos News is privileged to publish some recollections of one of those 'hams', now in his eighties, **Paul Caboche**.*

There were about a dozen of us, young Mauritians aged between 18 and 22, who were determined to understand the mysteries of radio communication. This was in the late 1930s. We taught ourselves Morse and learned from each other how to construct small transmitters and receivers, then began to make contact with other enthusiasts in the region – Reunion, Madagascar and South Africa.

Around the world, others were doing the same and, in many countries, the authorities granted so-called 'experimental' licences to beginners, entitling them to transmit on specific frequencies. We duly applied to the Mauritius Postmaster General, who responded, verbally, with a curt "Niet". Of course, we carried on regardless, with the authorities turning a blind eye to our activities – until the war broke out. Then, as elsewhere, the government impounded all such equipment. On 1 September 1939 the official responsible, George Bond, visited each of us and told us, very politely, that a van would come round next day to pick up our kit. No doubt he then reported his action to his superiors, who must in turn have asked the PMG's department what they knew of our activities. The latter denied all knowledge and, in short, the police were told to take action against us for being in possession of radio equipment in time of war. We hired a young attorney, Harold Glover, to defend us and he was able to point out that the charge was invalid, the war not having been declared until 3 September, by which time our gear had already been confiscated! The hearing was adjourned in confusion. Finally, we were charged under a 1936 law with minimal penalties attached and, as we had applied in writing for licences, were fined the princely sum of 5 Rupees.

It then dawned upon the authorities that they had urgent need of people who could read Morse. Without bitterness, we volunteered. Several among us were appointed to highly sensitive and potentially dangerous jobs, including those involving the maintenance of secret transmitters for use in the event of enemy occupation of Mauritius. But that is another story.

In May 1940, after training at the Admiralty cipher school at Vacoas, I myself was appointed to Diego Garcia to set up a radio station there. "What equipment will be used?" I asked and was told there wasn't any yet. "Well," said I "If you let me have back what you confiscated, I can guarantee communication with Mauritius. You just need to let another of our group have his kit too, so that he can be the base station." My friend, Volcy de Robillard was chosen. Soon I was on my way, accompanied by George Bond. The voyage took about 8 days and, three days later, our station was up and running, an

achievement which produced a telegram of congratulation from the C-in-C. Volcy, operating from his own home, passed on our messages via the police telephone to the Naval Signal Station. The same system operated in reverse for return traffic. At that stage there was no way of transmitting directly, using the frequencies available to us. Later, when adequate kit had been supplied, making possible direct contacts between Bombay, Aden, Singapore, Ceylon, Mauritius and Diego Garcia, the amateur link was retained purely as an emergency back-up. Wisely, for on one occasion it had to be used again.

To start with, the main purposes of the Diego Station (for which the Plantation Company manager's house had been requisitioned) were to keep the Mauritius naval base informed of any maritime movements observed and to transmit weather information. At 0600 local I would take down the met. data and encode it, then make contacts with Peros Banhos and Salomon (where my father was Manager) for any messages they might have. At 0700 I would transmit this material to Volcy de Robillard. It would all be passed on to the Navy for decoding and transmission to the relevant recipients, including the Company. In order to confuse the enemy, we used a whole variety of call signs – MXE, VRS 10, J7V, 8AT, 9 VC, QJ 1, etc. However, since there were only two operators and any competent listener would recognise our individual 'fists', the enemy could not have been deceived for long.

It was not until March 1941 that an RAF radio operator, a splendid man named Lewis, arrived to set up the military radio station. By then the workload had greatly increased. The met. readings had to be done three times daily, at 0700, 1000 and 1600 hrs. We also had to make contact, each morning and afternoon, with Noroit (what is now Downtown), where companies of both Mauritian and Indian troops were stationed. These contacts had to be made by heliograph at that stage. It was a tricky business. If the message was long, you had to keep adjusting the apparatus to make sure the reflected sunlight was beamed accurately. At night, we used Aldis lamps. Apart from these duties and the communications with Salomon and Mauritius, we also had to make half-hourly calls to guide flying boats patrolling within a range of 500 miles of Diego. As time went on, we developed a system to observe and report the appearance of any ships in the vicinity of the island, information which Mauritius could use to re-assure us or warn Allied vessels. Nor have I mentioned the messages which merchant ships used to leave for transmission during their voyages bound for Asia or South Africa, to re-assure the authorities that they had got that far without a hitch – they were forbidden to use their own radios except in case of enemy attack. Warned by heliograph from Noroit of their arrival, I would travel by launch to pick up the traffic at the lagoon entrance. Often too, I was called to naval vessels for similar purposes.

My own efficiency increased at the end of September, when someone brought me equipment recovered from a picket boat in Singapore. It had suffered horribly from spray and salt water, so had to be completely dismantled and cleaned. However, it worked fine when tested, so I could then use the Navy's frequencies and communicate at any hour of day or night. There were further improvements in December, which saw the arrival of new equipment produced by Marconi. And it was about this time that a contingent of 15 Mauritian soldiers under the command of Lt. J. B. Law arrived to defend the station in

case of invasion. The comfort they provided was largely symbolic. They were armed with Lee Enfield .303 rifles and one Lewis gun, all of 1914-18 vintage, and so little ammunition that, when two rounds were inadvertently expended during an exercise, the lieutenant considered it necessary to report the matter to his headquarters. I should add that I myself had been issued with a revolver, but the crate containing the bulk of ammunition was dropped into the sea at unloading, leaving only 50 rounds available.

Luckily, Diego Garcia was never attacked, for its defences were woefully inadequate. I myself departed in April 1942, enriched by lasting friendships and a host of memories, sad as well as amusing. The station was then manned solely by the military professionals. There is no doubt that our little ‘amateur’ operation had provided a vital service to aircraft, warships and merchantmen alike. Afterwards, our group of enthusiasts continued to serve their country, providing a network of secret radio communicators who could be used in the event of invasion of Mauritius and other islands in the southern Indian Ocean. It was a far cry from those innocent pre-war days. When I reached DG and soon after we were receiving frequent news of enemy raids in our vicinity. I thought that if I had to destroy the equipment I was using I should get something somewhere to replace it. I had some spare parts and I built a small transmitter and a radio receiver and with the agreement of the then manager found a place in the basement of his house and concealed it. I wonder if it’s still there!

**Paul Caboche**

We print, without comment, the following statement made to the House of Commons.

### **BIOT: Prevention of Resettlement by the Chagossians**

#### **Written Statement**

#### **British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)**

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Bill Rammell): **I would like to inform the House of developments in relation to the British Indian Ocean Territory.**

**In 1965, prior to Mauritius achieving independence in 1968, and with the agreement of the Mauritius Council of Ministers, the islands of the Chagos Archipelago were detached from Mauritius to form part of the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Territory was created to provide for the defence needs of both Britain and the United States of America. Subsequently, the plantations on which the population of the islands had depended for their livelihood were run down and closed; and the inhabitants – the Chagossians – were in due course relocated to Mauritius and Seychelles, from where they or their families originated. The vast majority of them automatically acquired Mauritian or Seychelles citizenship when those countries respectively achieved independence. In addition, the British Overseas Territories Act 2002 gave a large number of them British citizenship. This carries with it the right of abode in this country, which some of them have already taken up, and freedom of access to other EU countries. Following the relocation, Britain made £650,000 available for the express purpose of assisting resettlement. And in 1982 Britain made a further *ex gratia* payment of £4 million for the benefit of the Chagossian community in Mauritius.**

**In November 2000 the High Court in the UK held in judicial review proceedings that a provision of the Territory’s immigration law which had previously precluded the**

Chagossians from returning to the Territory without a permit was invalid. In the circumstances which then obtained, it was decided not to appeal against that ruling, and the immigration law was amended to reflect it.

Following the departure of the Chagossians in the late 60s and early 70s, the economic conditions and infrastructure which had supported the community of plantation workers ceased to exist. While the judicial review proceedings were still pending, the Government therefore commissioned a feasibility study by independent experts to examine and report on the prospects for re-establishing a viable community in the outer islands of the Territory. The latest report of the study was delivered after the November 2000 judgment and it was then placed in the Library of the House. It concluded that *“..whilst it may be feasible to resettle the islands in the short-term, the costs of maintaining long-term habitation are likely to be prohibitive. Even in the short-term, natural events such as periodic flooding from storms and seismic activity are likely to make life difficult for a resettled population... Human interference within the atolls, however well managed, is likely to exacerbate stress on the marine and terrestrial environment and will accelerate the effects of global warming. Thus resettlement is likely to become less feasible over time.”* Specifically with reference to climate change, the report advised that *“ the main issue facing a resettled population on the low-lying islands will be flooding events, which are likely to increase in periodicity and intensity and will not only threaten infrastructure, but also the freshwater aquifers and agricultural production. Severe events may even threaten life.”* The report also highlighted the implications for resettlement on such low-lying islands of the predicted increase in global sea levels as a result of climate change.

In effect, therefore, anything other than short-term resettlement on a purely subsistence basis would be highly precarious and would involve expensive underwriting by the UK Government for an open-ended period – probably permanently. Accordingly, the Government considers that there would be no purpose in commissioning any further study into the feasibility of resettlement; and that it would be impossible for the Government to promote or even permit resettlement to take place. After long and careful consideration, we have therefore decided to legislate to prevent it.

Equally, restoration of full immigration control over the entire territory is necessary to ensure and maintain the availability and effective use of the Territory for defence purposes, for which it was in fact constituted and set aside in accordance with the UK’s treaty obligations entered into almost 40 years ago. Especially in the light of recent developments in the international security climate since the November 2000 judgment, this is a factor to which due weight has had to be given.

It was for these reasons that on 10 June 2004 Her Majesty made two Orders in Council, the combined effect of which is to restore full immigration control over all the islands of the British Indian Ocean Territory. These controls extend to all persons, including members of the Chagossian community.

The first of these two Orders replaces the existing Constitution of the Territory and makes clear, as a principle of the Constitution, that no person has the right of abode in the Territory or has unrestricted access to any part of it. The second Order replaces the existing Immigration Ordinance of the Territory and contains the detailed provisions giving effect to that principle and setting out the necessary immigration controls. These two Orders restore the legal position to what it had been understood to be before the High Court decision of 3

**November 2000. I am arranging for copies of the Orders to be placed in the Library of the House.**

## **A TIME OF CHANGE**

NEIL HINCH

Having been briefed by several distinguished people on what my expectations of life on Diego Garcia should be, I arrived expecting to find a rather colonial and slow moving way of life; unfortunately the terrorist attacks of September 11th changed the whole ethos of life on Diego Garcia for the foreseeable future.

There has, and will continue to be, an ever changing shift from the past sleepy hollow in paradise where previous Brit Reps may have been fortunate to be able to devote much of their time to the protection of the environment. He/she will now find the real challenge of trying to balance the Operational Requirement – driven hard by the Americans, against what the island can realistically sustain without doing untold damage to the finely balanced eco system. Thankfully the island still has stalwarts such as Linda Corpus and Nestor Guzman, two people that work tirelessly trying to maintain some sort of status quo. However, during my tenure I did sense that their efforts and initiatives were not receiving the financial support needed to make real inroads into the many parts of the Natural Resource Management Plan that need to be progressed sooner than later.

I was advised that it would take at least 4-6 months to understand how the island works, quite correct, and with the ever-changing personnel and more importantly, personalities, progress can only be described as slow and, at times, rather tedious, spending much valuable time educating new arrivals! I was extremely fortunate to have worked alongside, during my initial period, one of the most popular and professional Officers to serve as the Commanding Officer of the US Naval Support Facility, Captain Bob Hibbert. He was gracious, understanding and unreservedly supportive throughout even though he was under considerable pressure from his peers to drive forward the operational requirements of the US.

To give an insight to how life on Diego changed following the onset of the operations in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) the population of the island increased from the average 3000 military and civilian to approximately 5000. The United States Air Force deployed an Expeditionary Wing to the island that required the erection of a large tented area, now aptly named Camp Justice; this was capable of housing some 2000 extra troops. B52 bombers flew over 2000 combat hours dropping in excess of 1.5 million lbs of munitions. The fuel supplied to ships and aircraft was in excess of 345,000,000 gallons! The inevitable start of Operation Iraqi Freedom further increased both personnel and machinery on the island. The build up was relentless and placed a considerable strain on the islands' utilities, especially the old and outdated power grid that failed on several occasions due to the massive demand placed upon it. Ships in the lagoon increased to a peak of 23, again placing a real threat to environment. During the hostilities the USAF increased the number of B52 aircraft and also deployed the B2 stealth bomber to the island. Over 150 sorties were flown dropping over 800,000 tons of munitions. A further 59,000,000 gallons of fuel was issued to ships and aircraft during the conflict.

There is no doubt that the US will, if not carefully controlled, increase their footprint on the Diego Garcia as they now acknowledge that DG is crucial to their operations in the Middle East and can also be used as a forward operating base for most Far East operations. However, although DG is under pressure, it is surviving and provided the British Representative, with the total support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, works closely with our US counterparts, using a balanced approach and pragmatism to the challenges that lie ahead, the environment should not sustain any further damage.

On a more positive note the environment in the outer islands continues to flourish. These beautiful, uninhabited outposts of British Territory are truly magnificent, teeming with wildlife that is a joy to see. I had the pleasure of visiting many of the outer islands and my memories of seeing young birds nesting on the ground at Middle Brother and the endless variety of species of fish around the Egmonts will stay with me forever. If I have any concerns it would be the increase of yacht visits to Salomon Islands that does need to be monitored carefully to prevent further coral damage. There is now a strong case to place permanent moorings to limit the number of yachts visiting and prohibit anchoring within the lagoon.

I often sit at my desk in London gazing out of my window and drift back to my time in DG. I now fully appreciate how fortunate I have been to serve as the Commander British Forces and British Representative. The separation from my family and the 17 hours flying time to get to DG was difficult. Nevertheless, the remoteness of the archipelago has, without doubt, contributed significantly to its survival. BIOT is one of the best-kept secrets and long may it continue.

### **Peak of Limuria : Correction**

Sir,

I have much enjoyed reading the splendid new edition of 'Peak of Limuria'. Those who have lived and worked on Diego Garcia (as I did between 1944-46) can only echo Father Dussercle's remark that "to leave the island is to die a little".

All the same, the new editors' account of the flying boat re-fuelling system (p 70 and endnote 16) is not quite accurate. The fuel pump was not designed by me (or even by Heath Robinson!); it was installed by the Indian Pioneer Corps when 29 AFBB was established. The tank ashore was filled from cans, then the fuel was pumped, via a pipeline to the end of the jetty, into a 45 foot launch, which took the fuel to the flying boats at their moorings. The launch was one of the victims of the 1944 cyclone and so the shore crew had to revert to re-fuelling by can, as was done in the early days of the war.

That was how I found things when I arrived. All I did – it was amazing that no-one had thought of this before or copied it elsewhere – was to order extra pipeline and arrange for the Pioneer Corps to construct a 30-cwt. sinker with shackles, which our 60 ft pinnace laid at a predetermined point. A buoy was then attached, to which the visiting seaplanes were moored and then towed tail first towards the end of the jetty, so that the fuel lines could be taken aboard by the crew. Once they were connected to the tanks, our lads

pumped the fuel directly into the planes from the tank ashore, eliminating the need for a launch.

I should also just mention for accuracy's sake that my friend Sgt Bill Cormack was actually my deputy.

Yours sincerely,

J. Loader

On behalf of the Chagos Conservation trust we apologise for our error in the new, revised Peak of Limuria and are grateful to Mr. Loader for setting the record straight.

### ***CHAGOS CONSERVATION TRUST EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING***

In accordance with Article 11 of our constitution we will be holding an Extraordinary General Meeting at 1800 on Thursday 9 September in the Rutland Room of Over-Seas House, Park Place, St James's Street, London SW1A 1LR in order to provide for *Honorary Presidents*, should we wish to appoint them. The special resolution reads:

**It is proposed to change Article 4 sub paragraph i. to read "The Association may have a patron and honorary presidents if at any time the Committee may so decide".** (The existing Rules allow for the appointment of a Patron).

### **CHAGOS CONSERVATION TRUST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

Our Annual General Meeting will be held at 1815 on Thursday 9 September in the Rutland Room of Over-Seas House, Park Place, St James's Street, London SW1A 1LR.

In accordance with the constitution those present will elect a Chairman, a Treasurer, a Secretary and Members of the Executive Committee.

At least one third of the members of the Executive Committee must stand down each year, and those co-opted during the year must stand for election. This year the following are therefore standing down:

Genevieve Edis, Paul Pearce-Kelly, Mark Spalding, John Topp

Nominations for office must be received by the Secretary at 29 Champion Hill, London SE5 8AL at least seven clear days before the meeting.

**The nearest underground station to Over-Seas House is Green Park. Walk towards Piccadilly Circus, turn right down St James's Street and second right into Park Place.**

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