

Chagos News

The periodical Newsletter of the Friends of the Chagos

No. 3

July 1994

EDITORIAL

Registration

Hurrah! We are now fully Registered as a Charity. The Charity Commissioners have allocated us the Number 1031561.

Editor

Richard Martin who produced our first two Newsletters so excellently has, sadly, had to resign. The good news is that he has landed a super job at a salary which is very impressive. The job is in the Cape Verde Islands which makes editing our Newsletter difficult. We wish him well and will expect news from his new We now need an Editor. Any volunteers? I will produce *Chagos News* until I can find a relief and it is obviously desirable that the Editor is independent from the Chairman. Please let me know if you are willing to take over.

Secretary

Richard Martin was also our Secretary. Simon Hughes has generously volunteered to take on this post. His address is 29 Champion Hill, London SE5 8AL Tel/FAX 071 738 7712.

Contributions

Contributions to the Newsletter are very welcome, especially on a disc compatible with an IBM machine with Windows and Word. Please send to me at 20 Lupus Street, London SW1V 3DZ.

Contents

Letter from Fred Barnett overleaf is a fascinating account of Diego Garcia in 1942.

Charles Sheppard has again made a valuable contribution and looks to the future.

MRAG has written an authoritative account of the new fisheries regime in BIOT.

AGM

The Annual General Meeting will take place in the Function Room above the **Barley Mow** pub in Horseferry Road, London SW1 at 6.30 pm on Wednesday 12th October 1994. The plan is to get through the AGM quickly and provide Friends and their friends an opportunity to meet and talk old times and new. Charles Sheppard will give a short talk with some slides. The room has a bar and food is available on the premises.

Do try very hard to attend. Usually when people meet in the name of Chagos you can not stop them talking which is why we will make the AGM brief. The Function Room is ours from 6-9pm but the management will probably be happy for as long as we want and we can always move to the main bar below.

Items for the AGM Agenda should be forwarded to the Secretary by 1 September 1994.

Bring your friends and any potential new Friends who are interested in the Chagos.

Let's have a good party.

Finally...

I look forward to seeing as many Friends as possible on 12th October.

John Topp

Letter from Fred Barnett

After a momentous journey which started at King George V Dock, London, I embarked in the VILLE DE STRASBOURG on 5th November 1941, bound for Mauritius. My journey involved joining a convoy which sailed north to the Firth of Forth, where the ships were attacked by German bombers, then sailing on through the Pentland Firth and on to Oban to meet other ships and escort vessels. In atrocious weather we headed out into the North Atlantic, where we were constantly under attack from U-boats.

It was six weeks later that we made port in Freetown, Sierra Leone, for a four-day stopover - greatly appreciated after the rigours of the Atlantic; then it was off once more to Capetown, where we made landfall on 31st December. The VILLE DE STRASBOURG carried cargo which was unloaded at various ports in South Africa en route to Durban, which we reached on 10th February 1942. It was on 24th March that I boarded the SS ZAMBESI for the journey to Mauritius, where we docked on 2nd April. Travelling with me on this posting was Eric Hood, who had the same qualification as me, Gun Fitter. We didn't know that one of us had to travel on to Diego Garcia, not even knowing where it was : the toss of a coin was sufficient to make the decision, in which I was the loser. So I set off for D.G. aboard - I think - the A.M.C. RANCHII, anchoring in the lagoon on 9th April. Transfer to the shore was by two landing craft handled by RN sailors. The first person I met was Staff Sergeant Phillips, who was hoisted inboard lying on a stretcher; it turned out he had some illness and I was his replacement. Despite his disability he was rather relieved to be going back to Mauritius from what he described as "*this hell-hole of an island*". So it was into the landing craft to find out what fate awaited me.

It didn't take me long to find out that everything was very primitive. The Battery, named 'X' Battery, consisted of officers, NCOs and men from the 25th Coast Battery from Mauritius, mostly regular soldiers: they had been due to return from Mauritius to the UK when the war broke out. The CO was Major Beardsell, who I believe came from Bombay, where he had a position with the tramways there. His Second-in-Command was Captain King who had arrived in D.G. with the 2nd Marine and Naval Beach Defence Organisation, who had set up the guns on the island. These were 6" Mk VII naval guns adapted for coast defence, and they can still be seen on the island today. Strategically the island, with its natural harbour, had become important since the fall of Singapore and Hong Kong. If we had been attacked, how long we could have lasted is open to conjecture as we had only 100 rounds of ammunition.

The accommodation consisted mainly of Nissen huts, raised off the ground by about three feet. I shared one of these with the Senior NCO, Sgt Major Peter Quinn. The beds were Indian charpoys, wooden frames with a lattice of plaited ropes to form a base.

I soon found out that the food was going to be pretty monotonous. The flour was moving with weevils, which were very difficult to eradicate, and the Company had no established Cook or Baker. George Bacon was elected (as he was a married man!) to try his hand at making some bread. The ovens were 40 gallon oil drums with one end open and a shelf inside. The dough was duly mixed and some currants added to make a 'Spotted Dick'; then it was tied up in a piece of an old bed sheet and placed in the oven in an Army dixie (cooking pot). When we considered it ready to be removed, we found that the dough had risen over the edge of the pot and had baked solid; and to extricate this inedible mass from the pots (we had baked two) we had to chop pieces off with an axe.

The flies were a constant nuisance: when you were drinking your tea you had to hold your hand over the top of the cup, or you got mouthful of them.

Of the many incidents which I could write about, two come to mind. The first was a visit to the island by Brigadier-General Platt, the G.O.C. the East Africa Command, who was famous for his action against the Italians in Eritrea and Somaliland. He flew in by Catalina for a fairly informal visit, and there was no 'bull' for his inspection. He spoke to all the ranks and listened to requests and complaints (although I can't recollect any of them being implemented). This must have been in about May, and it was another two months before we had another visit from Top Brass, another Brigadier-General, this time from India. The usual tour of inspection this time brought results: the next supply ship from India brought live cows, goats, pigs, rabbits and poultry.

There were four Newfoundlanders of the Royal Canadian Navy who were there because of their expertise as lumberjacks. They set to and built pens for the animals, and Gunner Jimmy Turner was appointed Zookeeper. The rabbits' pen was lined with flattened petrol cans to prevent them from burrowing through the soft coral sand; this seemed sensible at the time, but alas, the following morning the poor rabbits were all dead. They had all been roasted alive by the heat radiated by the tins, temperatures then being very high. So we never had rabbit stew.

The lumberjacks were tasked with felling the cows when required, and we did get some fresh meat. But the pigs were a problem, as a share of all the livestock was to go to the Indian troops on the island. There was a dispute over how the pigs should be killed, the Indian troops being adamant that they should be speared through the heart, to comply with their religious beliefs. I had a spear made and a number of heroes (myself included) volunteered to despatch the pig, but when it came to the crunch we all backed out; one of the Indians took on the task, and we all finished up with roast pork.

The hens posed a different problem. We had difficulty in containing them, and if you wanted an egg for some meal, you looked under your bed, up a tree, in the

trucks ...anywhere but in the pen made for them. No doubt some of their descendants are still roaming the island to this day.

One other significant item sent from India was the ingredients for beer, in lieu of bottled beer. We had no instructions but set about making a brew; hops, malt and yeast were placed in a galvanised bath, and soon after boiling, a 20 gallon batch was fermenting. This was strained through a bedsheet and poured into empty bottles, of which there was no shortage. Samples were drunk while it was still warm, to assess its potency - and it tasted good. The filled bottles were corked and arranged in rows around our Nissen hut. All seemed well ... until the middle of the night, when we were both bombarded with broken glass. The bottles had exploded because they were too full, and in the heat fermentation had continued after bottling.

Transport was provided by two four-wheel drive, 2.4 ton Chevrolet trucks; we and the Indian troops shared them alternately throughout the day. The one real road on the island ran from one tip of the island to the other, with another short one intersecting near the Eclipse Point end. With two trucks on one island it had to happen: one on each road, they collided at the intersection. From the wreckage of the two trucks we managed to resurrect one useable vehicle. It would not surprise me if some skeleton of these vehicles was still lying around somewhere in D.G.

I have mentioned Indian troops; they were the Bombay Grenadiers and a Pioneer Corps unit from Goa, commanded by Captain Gomez, and Pathans who came from the Indian Northwest Frontier. It was not unusual for the lookout in the Signal Station lookout tower to observe one or two, or more, of the Indians trying to swim home to India. A launch would be sent out to pick them up, and they would be put under restraint to prevent a second attempt.

The main diseases were pellagra, beri-beri, elephantiasis and typhoid. In addition tropical ulcers were a source of annoyance, and very slow to heal, and dysentery was commonplace. It must be remembered that antibiotics and penicillin did not then exist. The only remedy we had was liberal doses of DDT where we thought it might do most good. My orderly was Ahjam, a Mauritian Hindu who was taken by a mystery illness and subsequently died. His death certificate said *Lethargia encephalitis* (sleeping sickness). He was buried in a tomb, a 4 feet square concrete block, with the customary bowl of water and some chapatis to see him on his way. I wonder if that block is still visible and looked after as the other graves on the island are.

The Doctor, whose name was Banerji, was an officer in the Indian Medical Service and I believe he studied at Dublin and Edinburgh Universities. He was quite a character, and we got on very well. The Priest, a Father Duclerc, attended to the spiritual needs of the Mauritian gunners who formed part of 'X' Battery.

The names of the British contingent were: Major Beardswell, Captain King, Lt. Richards, 2nd Lt. Rouse, Sgt Major P. Quinn, Sgt Major Chirpy Watts, QM Sgt Tom Scott, Sgt Ben Cooper, Sgt Lawson, Sgt(Gun Fitter) Barnett, Bombardier Jacks, Lance Bombardier Ling, Bombardier Dagg, Lance Bombardier Bird and Gunners Bacon, Nesbitt, Bernon, Turner, Huggett, Griffiths, Collins, Beatson and Atkinson.

The coconuts were plentiful, and I do wish *Mutiny on the Bounty* would stop showing the nuts falling off the trees without any husk! The coconuts were the only island produce that we all appreciated. The giant land crabs were to be avoided, as they could amputate a finger if they got a grip.

Mosquitos were abundant, and their bites could be annoying, although thankfully they were not malaria-carrying. Old wood was an ideal place for scorpions to lurk, and I got a fright when one stung me when I was carrying a pile of old wood; however, the scorpions were not the poisonous type.

The fishing in the lagoon was tremendous, though (for some reason I never understood) fish was never a feature of our diet. One day I went fishing with the local boatman, and our quarry was to be barracuda or shark. We did get something on the hook, but it was too strong for us; although we had rags wrapped around our hands, the line was too hard to handle, and eventually broke.

The health of the British contingent became a source of concern, and in about the first week of October 1942 we handed over the guns to members of the Indian Royal Artillery who had been sent in to replace us. We embarked in the A.M.C. CARTHAGE, on about 10th October, for our return to Mauritius, and our information was that no British troops would ever be stationed on the island again. On arrival at Port Louis we were transported to Fort George for a medical examination; we may not have been like Belsen inmates, but we had all lost weight. I myself was downgraded medically from Grade A to Grade D, the lowest category. We were all sent to Vacoas, which was a rest camp, for a month's recuperation before returning to full duty.

On checking some of these details from my pay book I notice that my rate of pay was 5/6d (27 pence) per day. The facts as written are to the best of my memory; even after 52 years, they are unforgettable.

Fred Barnett

Mr. Barnett wrote again to report : *It is with regret that I have to inform you that George Bacon of Edmonton, London passed away suddenly in January. He was a great character and did much to keep up morale of the Garrison on the island. We were good friends and he and I were the only members of that detachment that either of us kept in touch.*

George Bacon was a Friend of the Chagos.

Development of the Tuna Fishery in the British Indian Ocean Territory

A 200 mile Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone (FCMZ) was declared around the British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT), in October 1991. Since then, on behalf of the BIOT Administration at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Marine Resources Assessment Group has provided administration services, handled licensing and provided advice on the management of the two distinct fisheries that operate inside the FCMZ. The largest fishery is conducted by distant water vessels, both longliners and purse seiners mostly fishing for tuna. The other smaller inshore handline fishery, worked by Mauritian mother ship and dory operations, is very different in character, and the subject of a future article.

Industrial scale tuna fishing has been practised throughout the Indian Ocean by Japanese vessels since 1952, by vessels from Taiwan since 1963 and by vessels from Korea since 1966, each operating longline vessels. These vessels, up to 800 Gross Registered Tonnes (GRT), target the larger species which become solitary when older (yellow tuna, bigeye tuna and the marlins), and which generally swim in deeper and colder waters. Each boat can set between 2,000-4,000 hooks per day on longlines and catch 1.5 to 2.5 tonnes per day of high value fish destined for the Japanese 'sashimi' market. The nature and fishing method of the longline fishery is such that these vessels are widely dispersed and travel long distances during the fishing season.

Japanese purse seining began in the Indian Ocean in 1979 with a Japan-Mauritius joint venture operation. This was followed by French and Spanish purse seiners which moved from their traditional fishing grounds in the Atlantic into the Indian Ocean in the early 1980's. Purse Seine vessels use large encircling tuna nets that take entire fish schools at one time. In most cases the vessels are in excess of 1,000 Gross Registered Tonnes, with a carrying capacity of 900-1,000 tonnes of fish. They fish 4 or 5 (maybe 6) trips per year and catch on average 5,000 tonnes per annum. They concentrate on surface schooling fish (skipjack or preferably yellowfin) which are young and form densely concentrated schools during their early life. The dominant fleets from France and Spain are based in Seychelles and tranship their catches worldwide, but principally to European canneries. The Mauritian and Japanese purse seiners also catch up to 15% or more bigeye in their purse seining operations. They achieve this by using deeper nets and making sets predominantly on fish aggregating devices (FADs), debris and logs which attract schooling tuna.

Although longliners are more widely distributed, they tend to concentrate on current interfaces, gyres and along oceanographic ridges. Searching for fish tends to be done by previous experience of fishing and through a knowledge of sea conditions. While much of this is similarly true for purse seiners, these vessels actively and visually search for fish and tend to concentrate their activities in areas where there have been known sightings; vessels often operate in groups and until recently have been supported by reconnaissance helicopters and aircraft. Longliners use oceanographic data, and trial and error whilst purse seiners also look for birds (with special bird detection radar), floating debris and the characteristic ocean surface disturbances of feeding or travelling schools. Since most of the purse seiners are based in Seychelles, as they have been since the beginning of the fishery in the early 1980s, their range of operations from there takes them only as far as they need to go. The pattern of fish catches almost certainly does not reflect the availability of fish, but rather a pattern also dictated by the economics of operations.

Longliners have always ranged freely across the Indian Ocean and periodically enter into BIOT waters. In the last 3 fishing seasons, (for the purposes of analysis a fishing season is defined the 1st April to 31st March), an increasing number of longliners have been licensed to fish. In 1993/94 a total of 29 licences were issued to Taiwanese longliners in two periods. The first from July to October, with a peak occurring in late August, and the second occurring from early November to the middle of January, with a peak occurring in the middle of December. A chart of the distribution of the years' fishing effort in this season shows that most occurred to the north east of the Chagos Archipelago. An analysis of the catch from logbook returns shows that 43% of the catch was yellowfin tuna and 46% bigeye tuna, the remainder being an assortment of swordfish, marlins, sailfish and other species. The opportunistic nature of this method of fishing often means that vessels require access to BIOT waters at short notice.

Notification of fishing vessels and applications for licences are dealt with directly by MRAG from their office in London. Once approved licences are passed to the BIOT Director of Fisheries for signature before they are forwarded to both Diego Garcia and the fishing company or agent. MRAG are also responsible for the monitoring and compilation of all aspects of fisheries operations reporting including radio reports on entry and exit into the FCMZ, regular catch and position reports once in the FCMZ and the collection of fishing logbooks following the completion of fishing trips.

In November 1993, two longliners were detained in BIOT waters. The first a Taiwanese longliner was successfully prosecuted for not complying with fisheries reporting under the terms and conditions of licensing. The second vessel the Sumiyoshi Maru No 16 from Japan, was detained on suspicion of fishing in the BIOT FCMZ without a licence. The owners pleaded guilty with mitigating circumstances. The overall near record penalty paid by the owners of the vessel was \$1.71 million, reflecting the high value of the catch on board the vessel.

Before the 1993/94 season only longline vessels from Taiwan and occasionally a few Mauritian purse seiners fished in the BIOT FCMZ under licence. In the summer of 1993, the BIOT authorities were approached by the Spanish fishing company Albacora S.A., seeking licensed access to the zone for their purse seiners in order to undertake exploratory fishing. An agreement was signed allowing 5 of their vessels access to the zone between 30th November 1993 and 1st February 1994. This agreement involved the BIOT authorities placing observers on board the Albacora vessels to monitor the fishery and provide scientific data. Following the arrest of the Japanese vessel and the signing of the exploratory fishing agreement there was a rapid uptake of licences to fish by purse seiners of both French and Spanish fishing companies. In the monthly 'Fishing News International' this was described as "Tuna Licence Rush in the Indian Ocean". The purse seiners paid their licence fees on the basis of the GRT of the vessel, rather than on the value of the catch. This means that there is no reason for the vessels to under report their catch and MRAG does not have to monitor the catch or catch values with a view to any form of royalty payment. Payments for licences are made in advance of fishing.

A total of 71 monthly tuna fishing licences were issued to French and Spanish purse seiners in the period from late November 1993 to early February 1994. During this period, tuna (in particular yellowfin tuna), which are highly migratory in the Indian Ocean, are actively passing through the BIOT FCMZ. Yellowfin tuna, mainly destined for canning operations accounted for over 80% of the catch of both nationalities.

Recent increases in the prices of tuna and total increased fishing effort in the Indian Ocean mean that the activity of purse seiners has recently moved eastwards towards BIOT. Whether the forthcoming fishing season for purse seiners is as successful as last year remains to be seen. In part this will be determined by the oceanographic conditions and the exact path of the migration of the main tuna stocks.

MRAG and the BIOT authorities will be co-operating with Seychelles, Mauritius and the

Indo-Pacific Tuna Development and Management Programme and other fisheries institutions in contributing data from the fisheries to the regional scientific assessments examining the sustainability of the fish stocks.

Andrew Emmonds

News from the Science Front

A "**Darwin Initiative**" proposal has been funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for research in the Chagos. Given to Dr. Charles Sheppard of the University of Warwick who applied for the funding under the "**Friends of the Chagos**" name as well as the University's, it will lead to an environmental management protocol for the area.

An important part of the funded project will revolve around a species and habitat inventory prepared from existing data and based on an advanced Geographical Information System, or GIS. This will build on recent work in Warwick which uses remote sensing and appropriate algorithms to map, in innovative ways, biodiversity patterns across large areas. Following the generation of these biodiversity maps with their linked inventories, the development of a good management plan will become feasible.

The plan will be based on the knowledge of the whereabouts of the key source and sink areas, and the importance here is not only the intrinsic value of the Chagos Archipelago but also its key roles and functions as a species stepping stone in the Indian Ocean.

This first grant will help in providing a central core to a wider range of projects which are being prepared for the Expedition in early 1996.

Charles Sheppard

The **BARLEY MOW** is in **Horseferry Road** where it meets Regency Street. The Barley Mow is opposite the Coroner's Court and close to the Magistrate's Court. The nearest underground stations are Pimlico and St. James' Park. The 507 bus from Victoria to and from Waterloo passes along Horseferry Road.

PEAK OF LIMURIA, the excellent book on Diego Garcia written by Richard Edis, former BIOT Commissioner and currently HM Ambassador in Mozambique, has been selling very well indeed and the publishers are about to do a reprint.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book which is the best available authoritative account of the history, flora, fauna, geomorphology and present status of the island today. The book will make an ideal Christmas present.

It continues to be available in the downtown bookstore in Diego Garcia, through any UK book shop, or from the publishers who are offering it to Friends of the Chagos only at the special price of £10.50 plus post and packing (£1 to UK addresses; check with Bellevs for p&p to other countries). The retail price is £14.95 elsewhere so this is a good concession. Contact Bellew Publishing at the Nightingale Centre, 8 Balham Hill, London SW12 9EA (Tel:081-673-5611), quoting "Chagos News".