

Move to Diego Garcia Island in the middle of the Indian Ocean

On the 19th of October, 1968 Gus and I got all 8 tons of our equipment loaded into a USAF C-130 aircraft destined for the Canal Zone, Panama. We said good by to the McCabes and a few other friends at the airport and we were on our way.

We spent a few days in the Canal Zone (Panama) buying fishing gear, snorkel gear and a bunch of other things we thought we would need on an isolated island. We bought everything in the US Army Base Exchange at Ft. Clayton. On the 21st of October we got everything loaded into a USAF C-124 aircraft, "Old Shaky", and took off for Charleston AFB, South Carolina.

In Charleston we met three additional people who would be part of our team on Diego. They were Fred Milwee Electronics Technician, Paul Jacobs Geodesist and Dick Kyle cook. On October 25th we loaded two BC-4 systems onto a USAF C-141 aircraft. A number of US Coast and Geodetic people also joined the group. They were destined for the Island of Mauritius off the eastern coast of Africa.

We stopped in Catania, Sicily and picked up another USC&GS team along with their BC-4 equipment. They would load on the ship with us in Mauritius and sail on to the Seychell Islands after we were dropped off at Diego Garcia. We made one stop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and then Mauritius.



Mauritius, Preparing for Diego Garcia

On the 29th of October we landed at Mauritius off the eastern coast of Africa and Madagascar. This was to be our staging area for the next 12 days in preparation for our voyage across the Indian Ocean to the island of Diego Garcia.

Mauritius is a beautiful lush green island with friendly natives of mixed Indian, African and French heritage. You wouldn't know it by being there but the island has more people per square mile than any other place in the world. Mannie Quintero from our office in Washington had arrived earlier to set up a temporary office in the US Embassy and to set up an account so we could start buying food and supplies for our occupation of Diego Garcia.

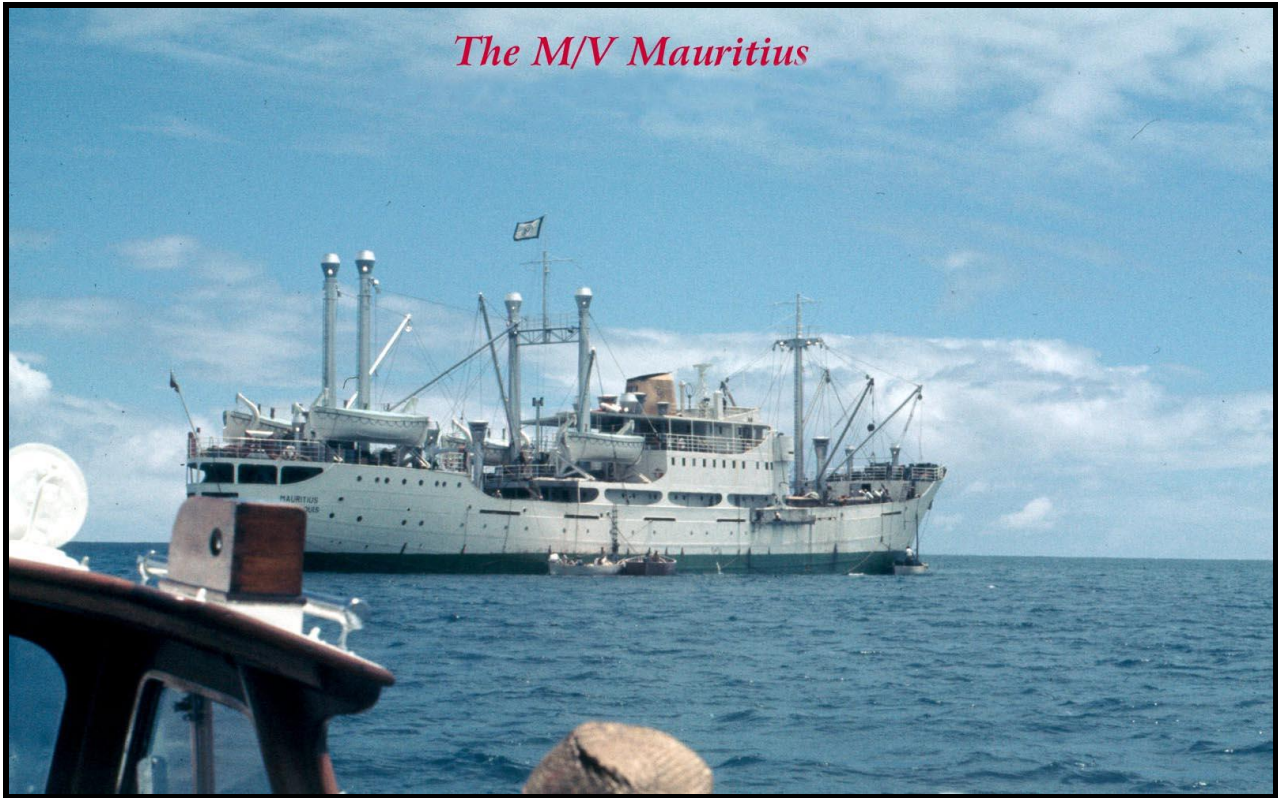
Earlier the Washington office had shipped in tons of equipment including portable buildings and a ¾ ton Dodge Power Wagon. But we had to buy a lot of goods and supplies locally in Mauritius including freezers, a refrigerator, stove, bottled gas, army type cots, mattresses, air conditioners, 90 drums of diesel fuel for the generators and a four month supply of frozen meat.

Building the Landing Barge

Information about Diego Garcia was sketchy. We knew there was a plantation there but only limited offloading facilities. So we had to build a landing barge that was capable of floating our 5 ton equipment van and all the other heavy equipment. I spent several days buying angle iron and twenty four 55 gallon drums. So in one day on the docks in Port Lewis we all pitched in and built a 12' x 24' barge using a portable generator, electric drill and steel banding equipment. We used two layers of ¾" plywood for decking. I hired a welder to come out and weld lifting loops onto the steel frame.



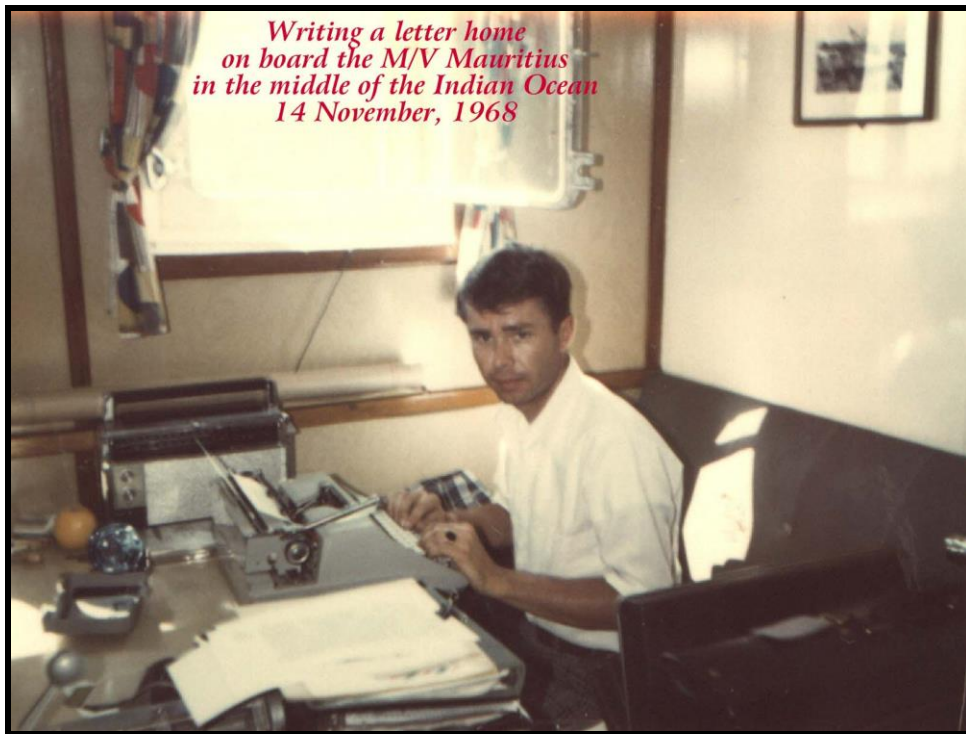
We spent the last day loading everything onto the ship “M/V Mauritius” which was a 225 foot long cargo vessel which was chartered by our office.



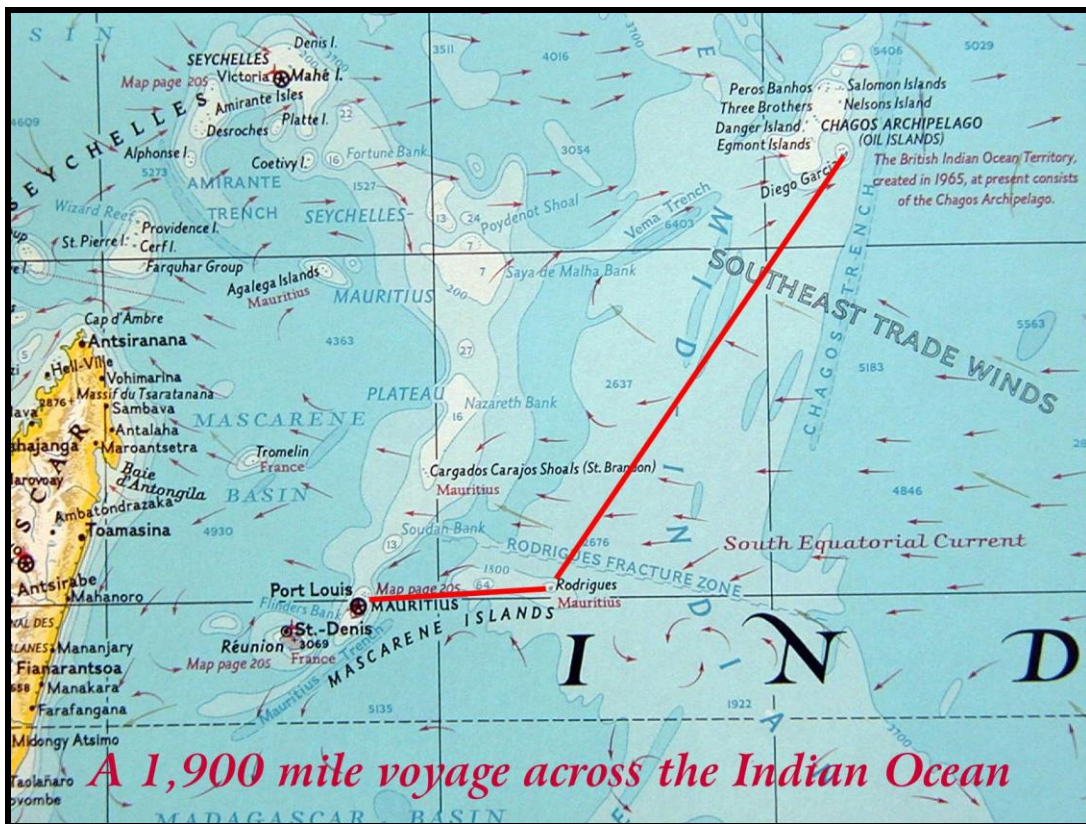
Crossing the Indian Ocean

At 10 PM on the 9th of November, 1968 we sailed out of Port Louis into the darkness of the Indian Ocean. Throughout our voyage a Russian vessel was seen following us just off the horizon. Obviously the Russians were curious to know what an American team was doing in the Indian Ocean.

Daily life on board ship became a routine. In the morning I would go down into the hold and open up our electronic equipment van to check the precise atomic clock which we had to keep running 24 hours a day. We ran a portable generator on deck each day to keep the batteries charged. We had small cabins and meals were served in the galley cooked by a Chinese cook. Every noon we would ask him “what’s for lunch?” and the reply was always “Poisson”. And we would reply “Oh no, not fish again”. In my cabin I used a portable typewriter to record my daily reports for the office and to write letters home.



A day and a half later we stopped at the isolated island of Rodrigues to drop off supplies. The island has a population of 5000. We enjoyed traveling around the island and took pictures. Gus Jones bought a 25 foot wooden boat that would later become our sail boat on Diego Garcia.



Arriving at Diego Garcia

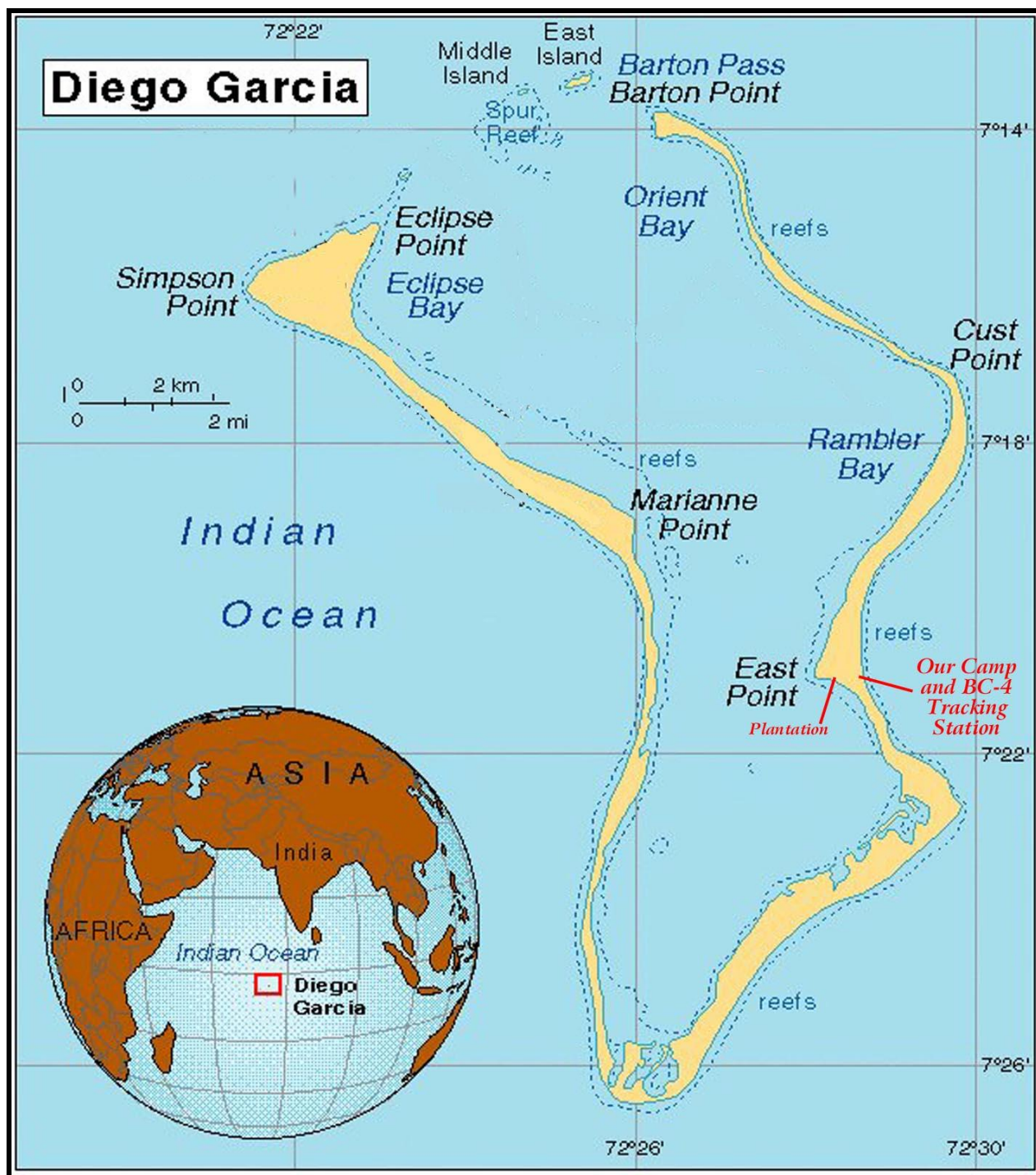
On the morning of the 16th of November after 10 days sailing we got our first glimpse of Diego Garcia, a long green line across the horizon . We all stood at the rail staring at this exotic isolated island with it's tall coconut palms and white sand beaches. We found it hard to believe that this was to be our home for the next year or so.



About the Island

Diego Garcia lies at seven degrees twenty minutes south, seventy-two degrees twenty-five minutes east, being an elongated, roughly 'V' shaped atoll, some thirty-five miles from tip to tip. It has one of the most continuous land rims of any atoll in the world, which surrounds a spacious lagoon, over twelve miles long and four and a half miles wide at one point. Most of the land area lies just a few feet above sea level, the highest point being less than twenty feet.

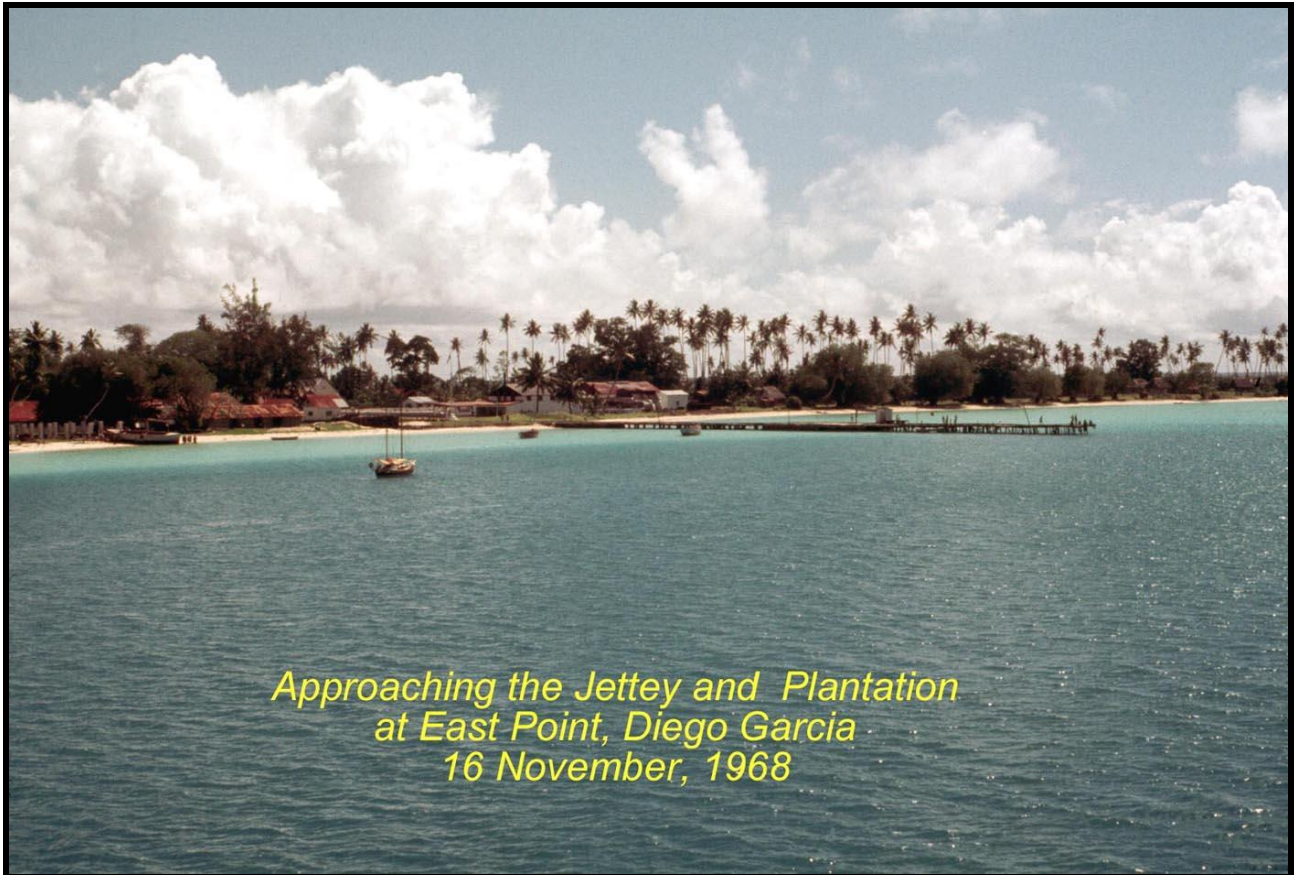
In 1968 Diego Garcia was what it had been for the past several hundred years. The island was not naturally populated. The 250 or so people on the island were from the Seychelles to the northeast or Mauritius. They were a mixture of French and descendents of African slaves and spoke a French-Creole language. The plantation staff and some workers lived at East Point and the coconut gatherers lived in small settlements throughout the island. We were the first Americans to live on the island since WWII.



Arrival at East Point and the Landing

After entering the lagoon on the north side of the island we sailed about half way down the lagoon near East Point where the plantation is located. The arrival of a

ship at the island was a major event. Many of the island workers were lined up along the shore at East Point to see our arrival.



We anchored about 100 yards off the end of the jetty at East Point. The plantation manager Reginald Payett came out to the ship and we discussed the off loading. We were surprised to find out that the Commissioner of the BIOT (British Indian Ocean Territories) had left word that we were not to offload our equipment. After some urgent cables to the Embassy in Mauritius we got things straightened out.

The ship lowered our landing barge over the side where it floated on water for the first time. They put cable nets under the wheels and lifted our truck out of the hold with the nose down so it would pass through the hatch. When lowering it onto the barge the front wheels rolled out of the nets and the truck went into the drink! Most of the truck was now in salt water. After some time they finally got the truck back on the barge and we got it floated to shore. The windshield had fallen out but one of the USC&GS guys had scuba gear and he recovered it. That evening a good part of the truck was disassembled and the salt water removed. As rough as it was it ran for the next one and a half years. With all of its rust it was affectionately known as the Cancer Wagon.



When lowering it onto the barge the front wheels rolled out of the nets and the truck went into the drink!

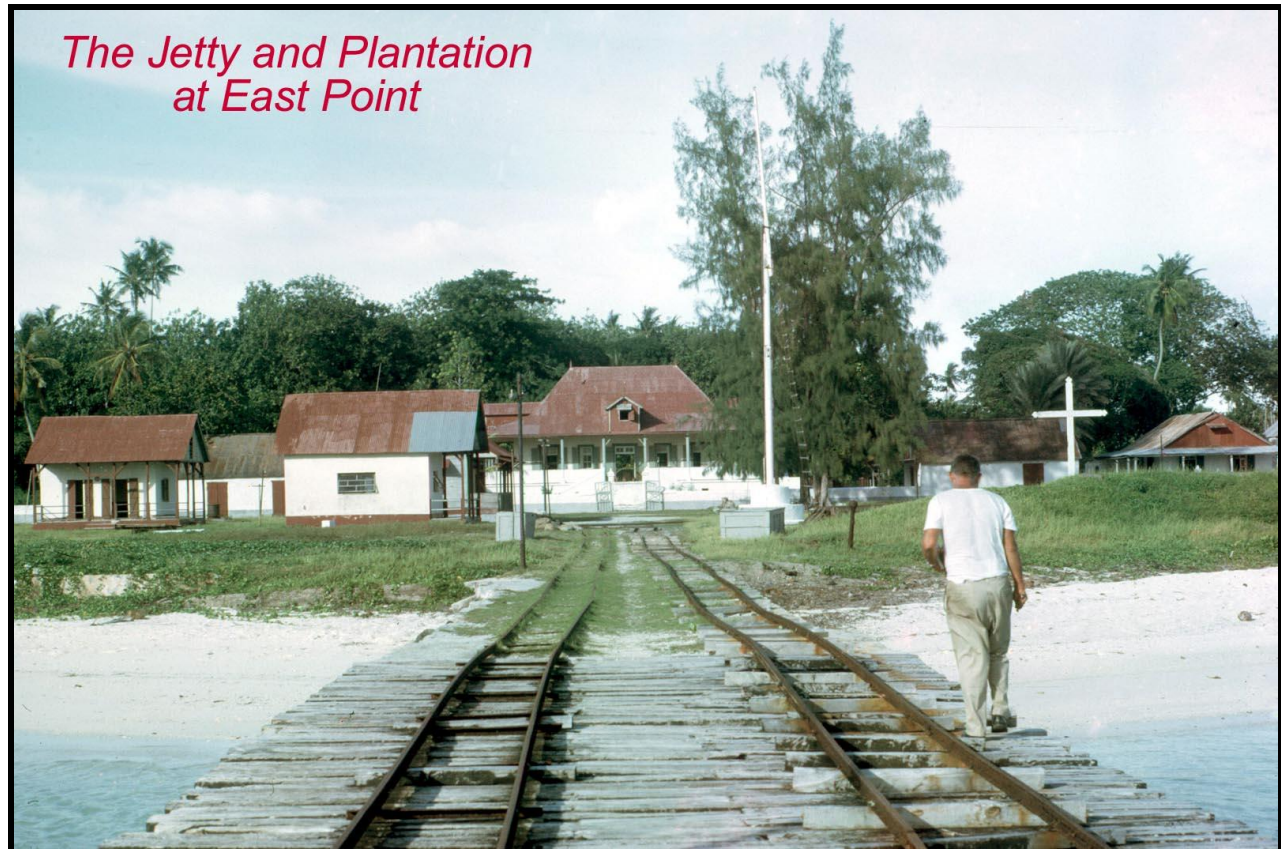


*Loading our BC-4 equipment van
onto our home made barge*

After we got the truck ashore we got the equipment van loaded onto the barge and floated ashore

With the help of the ship's motor launch and the island workers along with the island tractor, we were able to offload most of the 90 tons of equipment the first day. We stayed on the ship for a couple days until it left. Then thanks to the kindness of the plantation manager we set up housekeeping in some rooms in the plantation house.

Living in the plantation house was like stepping back 100 years. There was no electricity and none of the modern conveniences. The only fresh meat for most of the island population was fish caught fresh daily by the island fisherman. The staple food was rice. The weather was perfect except in the fall when the squalls would come in off the ocean every afternoon. The temperature stayed in the mid 70's to mid 80's with sunshine every day. It truly was an island paradise.



Setting up our Station

My first job was to select a location for our tracking station. After having a look around the island I decided on a site just east of the plantation on the ocean shore. This proved to be a good site because we had a nice breeze off the ocean and our buildings enjoyed the cool shade of a grove of coconut trees.

Over the next 21 days we put in a lot of long hard days keeping the generators running, setting up our equipment, pouring concrete monuments for our survey stations and building our portable buildings including a kitchen.

One evening when we were working on our buildings, Reginald Payett the plantation manager and Franz Brassel the island mechanic came over to our camp with a gunny sack full of large ocean turtles. They said they wanted to show us something. They dumped the turtles out on the beach, chopped them up with an ax and threw them into the surf. The water was red with blood and within a few minutes the area was teeming with sharks in a feeding frenzy. That was entertainment on Diego Garcia.

We had a beautiful view of the beach and the ocean from our camp. My hut was only 100 feet from the ocean. When the tide was out you could walk out several hundred feet on the coral shelf and cast a bait out into the deep ocean. I had 50 lb. test line and I rarely caught anything small enough that wouldn't break the line.

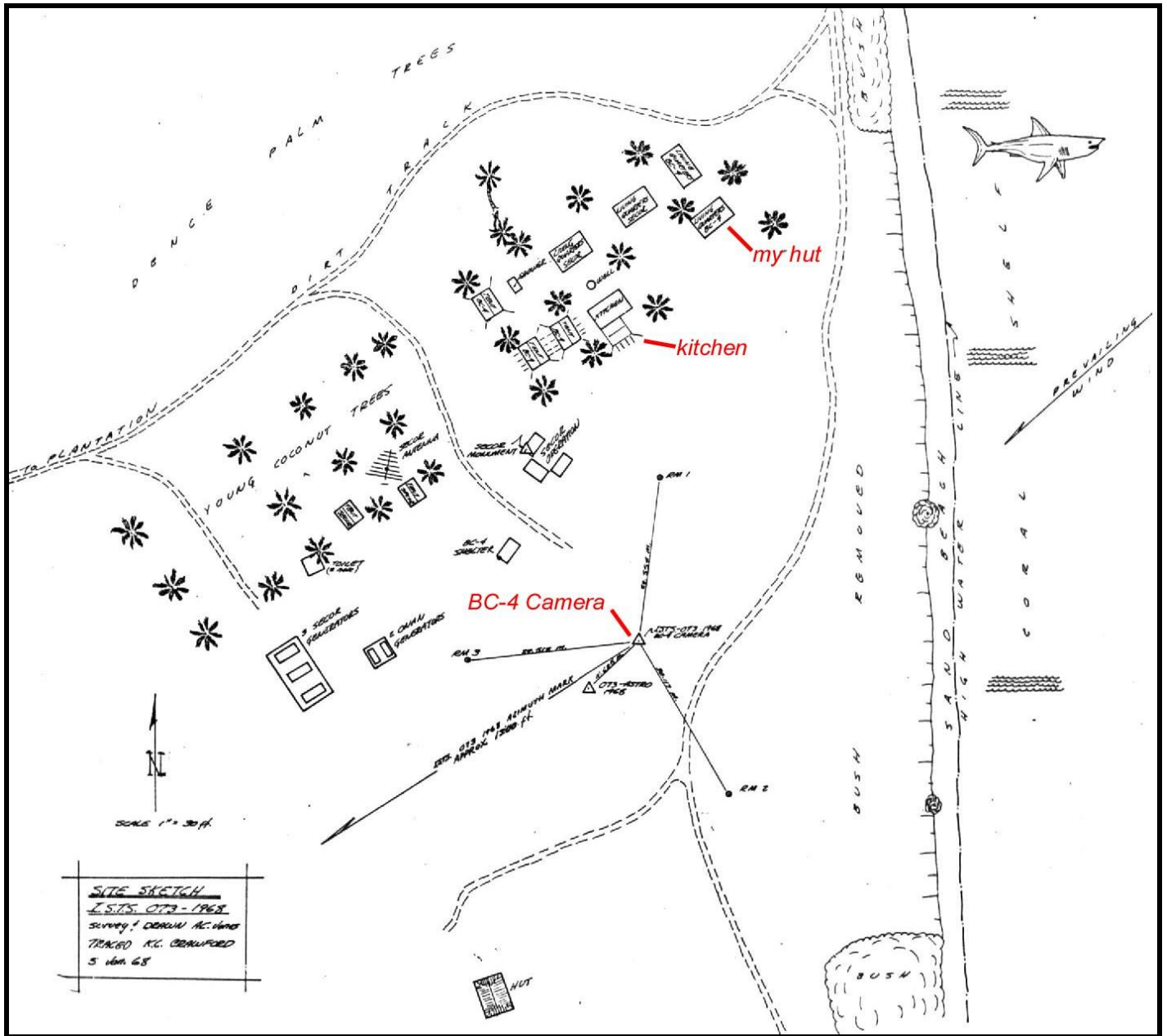
The first building to go up was the kitchen so Dick Kyle our cook could start cooking some American food. We had bottled gas, a refrigerator and two deep freezes. We attached a canvas canopy to the front of the kitchen with a table and chairs under it. This was the social center of the camp. Reginald and Franz would come over to our camp every day to visit and to wonder at all of our modern equipment. In the evenings it was the poker table.

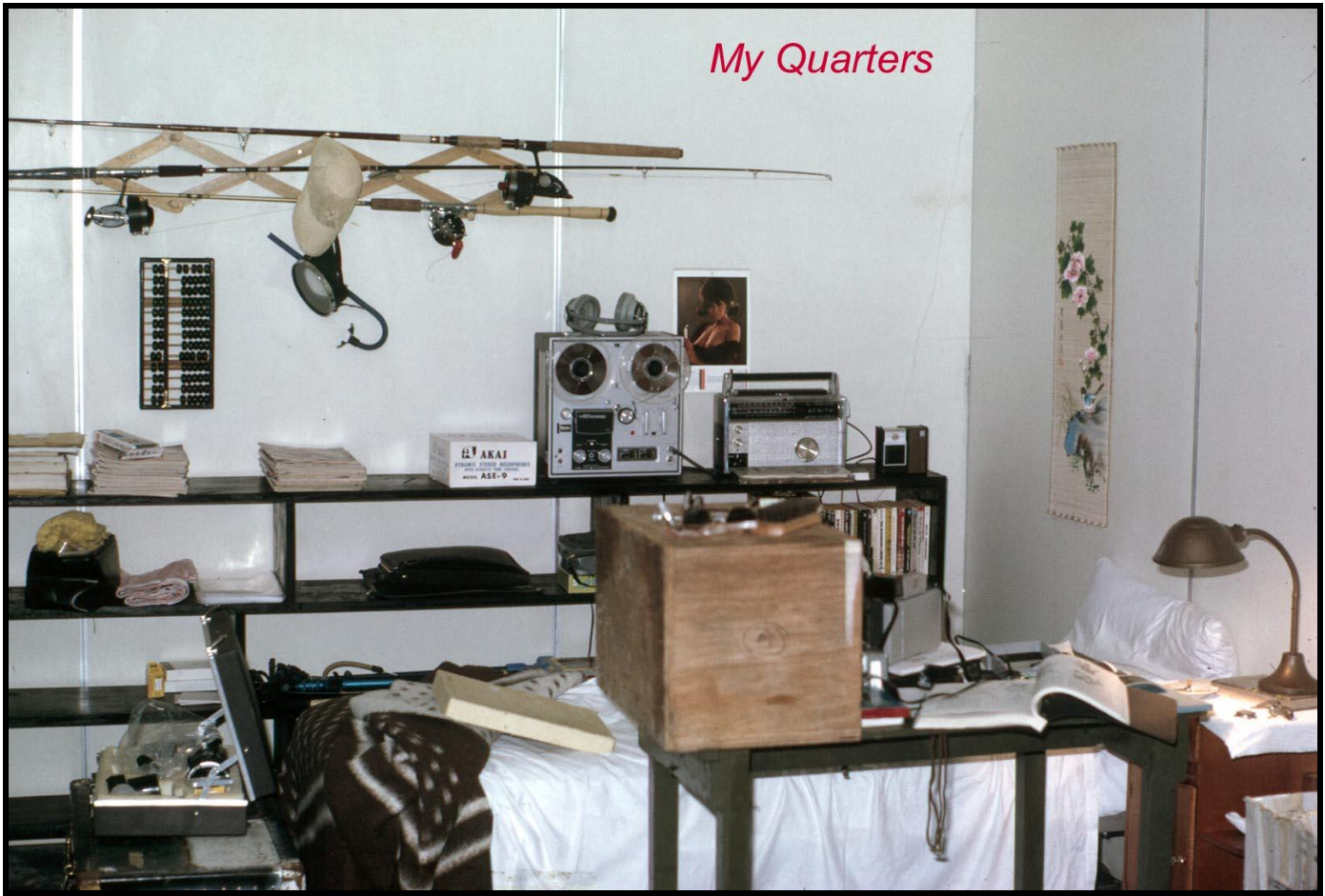


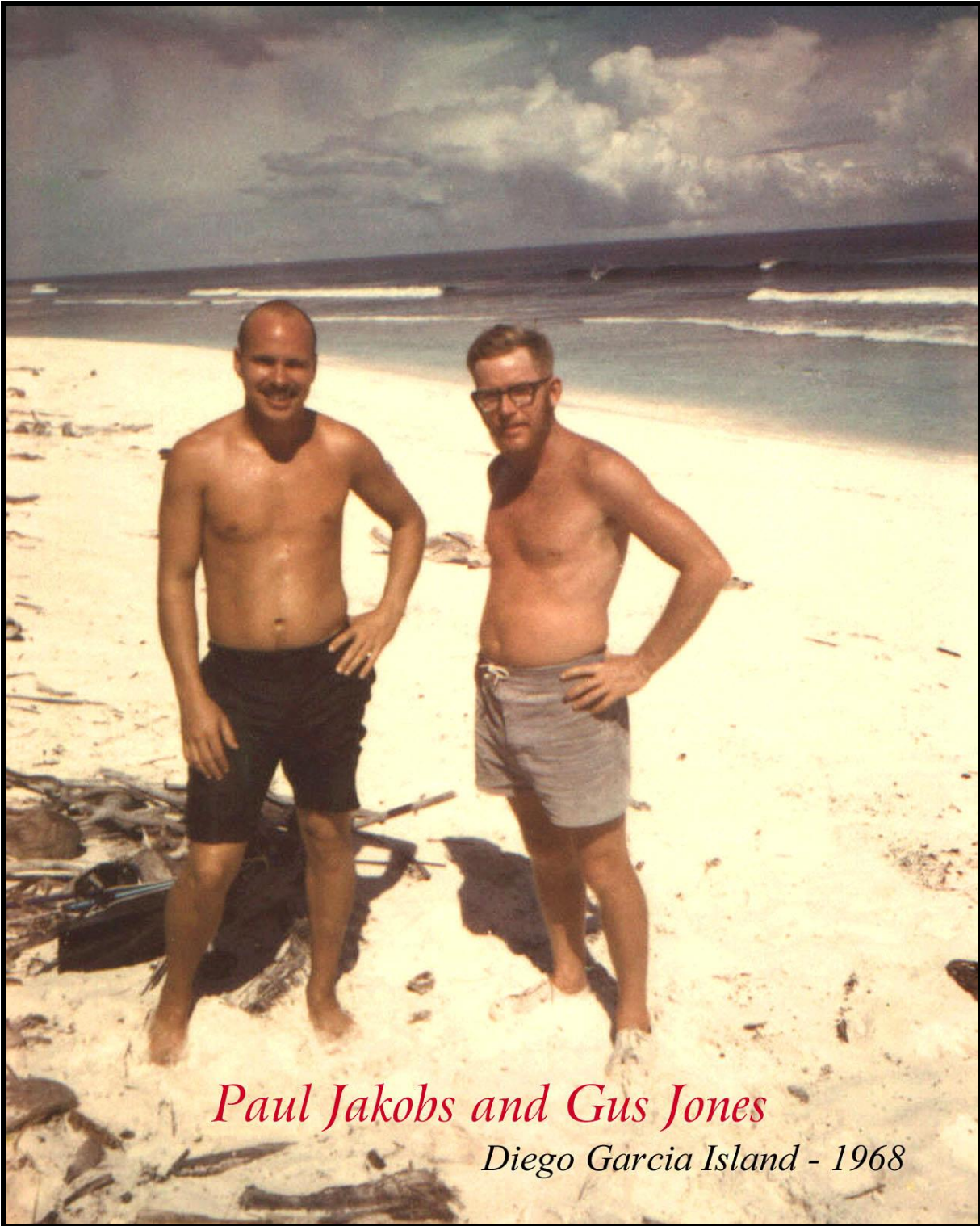
One problem on the island was finding fresh water. The few wells at the plantation were brackish. Reginald brought over some workers one day and they dug a well just north of the kitchen and hit salt water. They dug a second hole just west of the kitchen only 75 feet away and hit crystal clear sweet water at a depth of about 15 feet! The best on the island. We cut the tops and bottoms out of 55 gallon drums and stacked them up in the hole and filled in around them. We installed a plywood cap and an electric pump on the top. We put two drums on top of the kitchen and Dick Kyle would pump them full every morning. So we had gravity feed water into the kitchen and our home made shower.



BC-4 Camera dome and the Astro Observation Tent on the left.
Electronics Equipment Van with Radio Communication Antenna on the right.







Paul Jakobs and Gus Jones

Diego Garcia Island - 1968

Life on Diego Garcia

We had air conditioners in our buildings so life was slowly becoming civilized. We could talk to Washington on our communication radio nearly every day as long as the atmospheric conditions were right.

After 21 days on the Island I called Washington and reported that the station was operational. Soon we settled in to a routine of working at night and exploring the island by day. From the camp you could walk north along the wide sandy beach for about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to Mini-Mini where the surf came in big off the ocean. We used to go swimming and snorkel diving in the surf. On Christmas day, 1968 my team and the plantation staff drove around to the northwest tip of the island for a picnic. This is now the site of a US base and sea port.

Fishing on the Island

On Saturday evenings we would drive up to the northeast tip of the island to fish for sharks. We would bait a large hook with a pound or so of fish and throw it out into the mouth of the lagoon. We used rope for fish line. We would sit on the sand drinking beer and wait for a big tug. Dick Kyle caught a 250 pounder one night.

One day Franz took us out fishing in one of the island long slender boats near the mouth of the lagoon. You could drop your line down 50 feet and see large groupers biting on your line in the crystal clear water. You had to pull them up fast because the sharks would take your fish. I hooked a good sized barracuda with my salt water spinning rig. All the sudden I saw it coming straight to the boat real fast. I was sitting at the back of the boat with my bare feet in the water. The fish came straight up out of the water and landed in the boat! At the same time a big shark that was chasing it hit the bottom of the boat right under my feet! After that I kept my feet out of the water. I don't think Gus caught a whole fish that day. All he got was fish heads after the sharks got the rest.

The First Ship Arrives

After 109 days we finally had a ship arrive with supplies and mail. It was the Nordvair out of the Seychelle Islands. We had run out of fresh meat and gasoline for the truck. Myself, Gus and Paul Jacobs had ordered 100cc Suzuki motorcycles. Each bike had about a half a tank of gasoline. The ship didn't bring along the 5 drums of gasoline that we had ordered. So we didn't get much riding done until the next ship that came in some three months later.



After 109 days the First Ship Arrives at Diego Garcia

That night there was a big party at the plantation house because whenever a ship would visit the island it was an occasion to celebrate. And we were having a going away party for Fred Milwee who was returning to Washington. By that time we had run power lines over to the plantation house so they had lights. We furnished the drinks and music so we all had a great time with plenty of drinking going on. Both Gus and Paul crashed their motorcycles on the short $\frac{1}{4}$ mile trip back to our camp in the wee hours of the morning. They didn't get hurt but some brake and clutch handles got broken. The worst hazard riding motorcycles at night on the island was hitting large coconuts. I managed to make new handles out of aluminum using a hack saw and file.



The worst hazard riding motorcycles at night on the island was hitting large coconuts

We were able to make occasional patched telephone calls home on our high frequency radio station by contacting our main station in Beltsville, Maryland. But it was nice to receive mail from home for the first time.

Our Heard Island Neighbors

Another team that was looking forward to the first mail to come to our island was the BC-4 team on Heard Island some 1000 miles south of us in the Antarctic Ocean. The 6-man team spent 9 months totally isolated with no ship visits on one of the most isolated and inhospitable locations in the world. Part of their high frequency radio broke down so they were only able to contact us and several other stations in that part of the world. So we were their only contact back to the US. Two of my friends were on that team. Ben Roth who I had worked with in the deserts of the Sudan and Alan Joll.

When their letters would come in I would read them over the radio. When they wanted to get mail out they would read their letters to me and I would record them on my tape recorder. Later I would type them up and mail them off on the next ship. So the turn around time for their mail was quite long. It's amazing now to realize that what took nine months to a year to complete these mapping positions at these stations with tons of equipment can now be done in a matter of minutes with modern satellites and small hand held receivers!

On the Radio

The 1000 watt Collins single sideband communication radios that each station had served us well. I was able to talk to my friend Ed Alsop who was at the BC-4 station in the Seychelles. I talked to another friend Hank Heuerman who was operating the unit at McMurdo station in the Antarctic. I also talked to a friend Robbie Dixon in Iran. I had also worked with Robbie in the deserts of the Sudan. On the 17th of July, 1969 we listened to the launch of Apollo 11, and on the 21st of July we heard the words “Houston, the Eagle has landed”. It was 1:18 AM on Diego Garcia. The Island was a very “quiet” place as far as radio reception was concerned. On short wave we listened to stations from around the world including popular music from Luxemburg and the news from the Voice of America or the BBC from London. HCJB from Quito, Ecuador came in like next door.



Wild Horses

The island had a small population of donkeys, wild dogs and horses. They had been brought into the island as domestic animals at one time but had become wild and were free to run all over the island. There were five wild horses that used to gallop through our camp early every morning around 5 AM. We were told that at least one of them had been a race horse and that they had been brought in from Mauritius. Fred Milwee and Henry, one of the Filipinos caught the big bay mare one day. Their attempts to ride it were unsuccessful so after a week they let her go free. I never saw any of the wild dogs. Reginald the plantation manager said they used to hunt the wild dogs.

A very unique crab called the Coconut Crab lived on the island. They get very large and they can tear the husk off of a coconut with their large claws. There were also tree rats that lived in the coconut trees. Flocks of myna birds used to roost around our camp waiting for our cook Dick Kyle to throw them some scraps.

The Island Fisherman

There was one young man who's job it was to catch fresh fish daily for the island's population. Most of his fishing was done in the lagoon. One day he came into camp carrying a fresh set of shark jaws large enough to bring down over his head and body. He had been fishing near the mouth of the lagoon where he hooked the big shark. It towed him more than a mile out to sea before he could get it along side his small boat and harpoon it.



The Island Fisherman with the Big Shark Jaws

The Outrigger Sail Boat

During our stop at Rodrigues Island Gus bought a 25 foot fishing boat that was shaped like a canoe. It became an island project to build an outrigger sail boat out of it. The islanders had small outrigger sail boats called pirogues that they built themselves. As our boat was being fitted with sails and rigging the betting started as to who's boat would be the fastest, ours or the plantation manager's. We used our tents for sail cloth, steel antenna tubes for a mast, and steel cable for rigging. The island carpenter hand crafted a hollow outrigger from a solid log. The outrigger was about 10 feet long. In a race in the lagoon our sail boat was the fastest.



The Outrigger for our Sail Boat being built by the Island Carpenter

Diego Garcia Island was part of the newly established British Indian Ocean Territories or BIOT. Gus named our boat the "Anti-BIOTic" and it was a fine sail boat. When the commissioner of the BIOT visited the island he thought the name was quite amusing.

The first big test of the sailboat was the day a British Navy ship arrived and anchored outside the mouth of the lagoon. It was stopping by the island to bring us some supplies. Also on board was Alex Pinter who came out to replace Fred Milwee. The ship's draft was too deep to enter the lagoon and we were unable to make radio contact. So Gus and Franz Brassell set out in our new sail boat at East Point and headed north up the lagoon. The rest of us drove up to Northeast Point to watch them with binoculars. It was a windy day and they sailed the few miles up the lagoon in no time. As they approached the ship they tried to lower the main sail but it was stuck and they sailed right past the ship

out into the ocean. The wind was such that it was difficult to tack back to the ship. It took them most of the day to get back.

Gus was dressed in a big straw farmer's hat, shorts and shower shoes. The captain made him go below and changed into some of Alex's clothes so he would be "properly attired" while on board.



The Only Known Photograph of the Anti-BIOTic

All You Can Eat Lobsters

When the moon and the tides were right, one could walk out on the coral shelf and find hundreds of large spiny lobsters. The procedure was to carry a flaming torch and a gunny sack. Just walk around on the coral in about a foot of water and pick them up. Our team kept a large supply in the freezers for trading material whenever ships called at the island. We ate lobster until it came out our ears. We had gallon cans of butter to go with them.

Sometimes when the ship didn't come in, the island would be out of tobacco among other things. It was not uncommon for a plantation worker to spend the day walking all the way from Pointe Marianne around to our camp with a dozen eggs to trade for a couple of cigarettes!



Our Cook Dick Kyle with a Basket of Freshly Boiled Lobster

The Motor Launch

We always wanted to go fishing out in the ocean so after we got a new shipment of generators, Alex Pinter took on the project of building a motor launch. An old wooden boat about 30 feet long, originally used to haul coconuts, was acquired from the plantation. Alex and Franz installed one of the old generator motors, fabricated a prop shaft out of an old iron bar in the blacksmith shop, and installed a brass propeller that was found at the plantation. That rig and its crew were almost lost out to sea one time when the engine quit during a storm.

Poker Night in our Camp

During our stay there we naturally became close friends with the plantation staff and many of the island workers. Many evenings Regenal and Franz Brassel, the plantation mechanic would come over to our camp for a round of poker in front of our kitchen. Bets were made with Mauritius Rupee coins, many of them dating from the 1800's. We always had to be careful about winning too much as to upset the island economy.



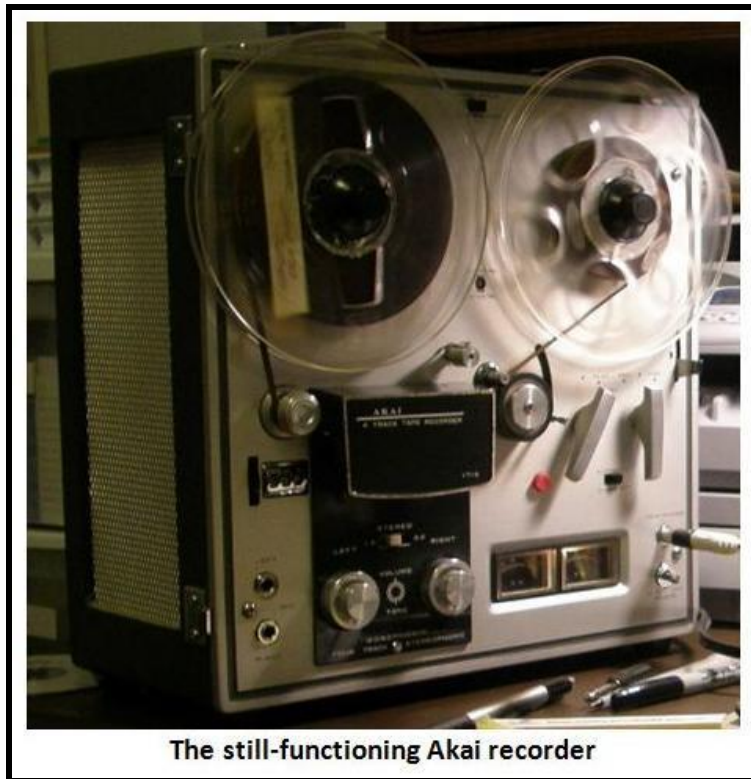
Saturday Night Poker Game in front of the Kitchen in our Camp
Left to Right: Regenal Payett – Plantation Manager, Filipino,
Pal Jacobs. Filipino, Franz Brassel – Plantation Mechanic, Fred Milwee (with beard)
Henry Moreno and Gus Jones

The Sega Party

One of the activities enjoyed by the island workers was the "sega" parties. Sega was a brew made of fermented coconut juice by the workers. These parties were supposedly outlawed by the BIOT but they popped up here and there on Saturday nights. One Saturday night in March, 1969 we were invited to one of these and it was wild. The music consisted of four 55 gallon drums beat on with rocks and fantastic singing by a women with the loudest voice. The songs were stories in the Seychellois language about daily life, folk lore and many other things. Gus and I brought my tape recorder over to the shore near the jetty and recorded the evenings activities.

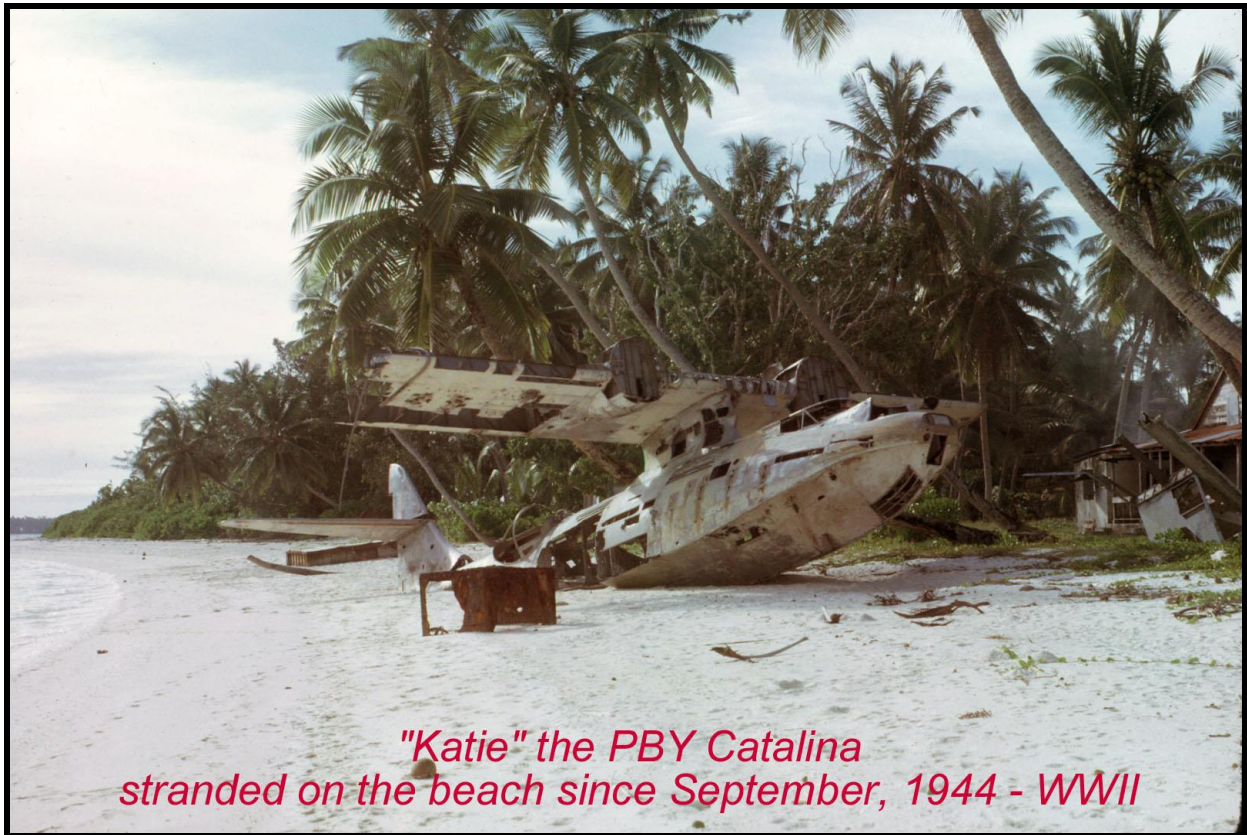
The following article is posted on the Internet under www.chagos.info

In March 1969, Kirby Crawford, a geodetic surveyor working on Diego Garcia, taped a convivial evening he and a few fellow Americans shared with a group of Chagos islanders. The equipment he used was an Akai tape recorder [pictured below] which he had acquired in Khartoum, Sudan, while working there in 1966-7. When he moved on it was shipped with a few other possessions to Wisconsin. Posted to Diego Garcia, Kirby later asked his brother to ship the recorder and some music tapes to him. The equipment somehow made it through Mombasa to the Seychelles and from there onto one of the Nordvaer cargo ships that made occasional trips to Diego Garcia. Little did Kirby imagine, on that balmy Saturday evening, that his recordings of the songs of the islanders and the administrator's speech would provide posterity with a unique cultural record of a moment and a place which has become historically significant and shrouded in controversy. Luckily the recorder still works as well today as it did then, which has enabled Kirby to transfer the recordings to his computer from where their dissemination on the website of Ted Morris has gifted us one of the few authentic cultural souvenirs of Chagos in the late 1960s.



“Katie”

On the 16th of September, 1944 during WWII a British PBY Catalina Flying Boat named “Katie” took off from the Maldives some 1,000 miles north and landed in the lagoon at Diego Garcia. It got damaged in a storm and has been stranded on the beach at East Point ever since. We used to climb around on it.



Leaving the Island

In August the office in Washington asked me if I would establish a BC-4 station in northern Thailand and I agreed to that. A British Navy vessel was scheduled to call at Diego around the 7th of September. On the 1st of September Alex Pinter and I were up to our elbows trying to fix a generator when a runner from the plantation came into camp and said that there was a motor launch at the jetty. They were looking for an American and they were leaving in 20 minutes! I threw my belongings into a suit case, said a quick goodbye on the jetty and was on my way. We motored up the lagoon and out to the ship HMS Baccus. I had been on the island for 10 months.

On the 5th of September we landed at Port Louis, Mauritius. I spent four days in Mauritius and spent time with the BC-4 team there. On the 8th of September I boarded a BOAC VC-10 and landed in Nairobi, Kenya. It was quite strange and fascinating to be back in civilization. I enjoyed revisiting Nairobi, I took another trip into the game park to take pictures of the wild game. From Nairobi we landed in Athens, Greece. We flew right over Khartoum, Sudan and I could recognize parts of the city and the Nile river.