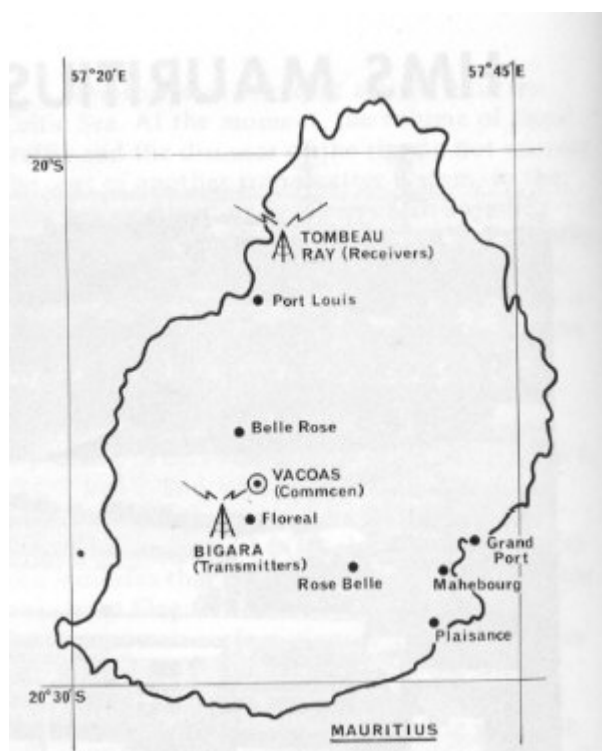


MAURITIUS

A BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS HISTORY

Originally published in the Spring 1976 Communicator Magazine

With the closure of HMS Mauritius on 31st March 1976, the Royal Navy will break a link with the island of Mauritius which goes back to the original British occupation of the island in 1810. However, for the sake of brevity I intend to confine my story to the communication aspects of the association.



The 'Jewel of the Indian Ocean', Mauritius (or Ile Maurice) is set in the Indian Ocean roughly 20 degrees South, 50 degrees East. It has a land area of some 720 square miles, being about 38 miles long and 29 miles wide. The island was originally inhabited merely by birds and animals of which the Dodo was the most well known. Arab and Portuguese sailors started using the island as a watering and revictualling stop of their voyages down the coast of Africa and to the 'Spice Islands' respectively.

The Dutch were the first to attempt to colonize the island in about 1638 but their occupation was beset by many problems and they eventually withdrew in 1710. The French then took over the island in 1715 and under the inspired leadership of Labourdannis the colony grew. The French introduced the sugar cane on which the island's present economy is largely based.

The French also introduced slave labour from Africa to work the sugar plantations and thus laid the foundations of the Creole part of the population.

Prior to the opening of the Suez Canal, Mauritius occupied an important position on the trade routes from Europe to the East and it was inevitable that it should become involved in the power struggle between the French and the British. After

some initial reverses, which included the only major French naval victory of the period when a French fleet sank a small British squadron at the Battle of Grand Port in 1810, the British invaded the island and beat the French. The island remained a British colony until independence was granted in March 1968.

With the opening of the Suez Canal the strategic value of the island fell but it was still visited by HM Ships and was used frequently during both World Wars.

Naval communications ashore on the island began as far back as WWI when in 1915 a wireless station was built on a site in Rose Belle. It is rumoured that the original surveyors recommended that the station should be built at Belle Rose on the high plateau of Plaine Wilhelm but the contractors confused by the similarity of the place names, started construction in the wrong place. Be that as it may, the station at Rose Belle was in operation from 1915 to 1947 with the Navy occupying it until the mid 1920's. A letter from CPO Tel Sidney Perkins of the 1918 Telegraphists Association reveals that the station used high power MF Spark Transmitters and operated in a chain of stations consisting of Admiralty, Malta, Aden, Seychelles, Mauritius, Durban, Port Nolloth (SWA), Bathurst, Gibraltar and Admiralty. Thus the whole of the Indian Ocean and South Atlantic was covered and HM Ships at sea could make use of the facilities provided.

CPO Tel Perkins also tells us that the staff at the station was one Warrant Officer, one CPO Tel, four Leading Tels, six Telegraphists, a CERA and a CEA.

Round about 1923 the station was handed over to the Colonial Office as, with the introduction of HF, it had become surplus to naval requirements and, as far as I can discover, there was no naval communication on the island for a short period.

The next occasion the island was considered for naval communications was in June 1935 when the C-in-C, East Indies recommended the erection of a wireless station in Mauritius. Tests were carried out on various low HF frequencies with HMS Norfolk who was visiting the island and it was decided as a result of these tests that a site at Bigara would be suitable for a transmitting station and that Vacoas, already the home of the army garrison, would serve as a receiver sit and communication centre.

The advent of WWII hurried these proposals along and new equipment and buildings were installed. Mr. E. Goldsmith currently Private Secretary to HE the Governor General but then an HO Sparker, recalls that in addition to a Commcen at Vacoas and a transmitting station at Bigara there was also a torpedo and stores organisation on the old race-course at Floreal, an armament depot, a Naval Air Station at Plaisance on the site of the current international airport, a Port War Signal Station at Fort George (Port Louis) and a flying boat station at Tombeau Bay close to the site of the present receiving station. In addition, of course, was the normal army garrison supplemented by batteries of artillery at Port Louis and Mahebourg.

It would appear that some 60 communicators were employed on the island at this time. Six or Seven manned the PWSS, about ten were employed in an HF/DF station situated on what is now a golf course and some forty in the Commcen and Bigara. When the war finished in 1945 a general run down began and the

communications were put on a care and maintenance basis in about 1956. However, weekly schedules, first with Colombo and then, when the station boundaries changed in about 1957, with Simonstown were operated by the C and M personnel of whom CRELs Taylor and McGrath, both ex-CPO Tels, were the last. In about 1958 the weekly schedules to Simonstown were taken over by the Mauritian Local Volunteer Force operating from Port Louis. The Volunteer Force also provided services for visiting ships and became the only link with the outside world following the devastation caused by Cyclone Carol in 1960.

Merchant Ships in Area III. At Christmas time a further Morse broadcast (VC) was brought up to handle the immense amount of telegram traffic. As all ship-to-shore traffic was CW in those days, Mauritius (GXO) manned the 4,6,8,12,16 and 22 MHz components to deal with the high volume of telegram traffic, particularly telegrams from merchant ships. RS Acott who was an RO3 in Mauritius in 1962, recalls that the ship room was manned by seven locally employed civilian operators plus two naval sparkers to operate the Morse broadcast. He also said that the Christmas period was so busy it became a nightmare. It would appear that RS Acott's estimate of some 15,000 transactions per day would not be unrealistic. Certainly a traffic graph for 1972, when the area scheme was on its last legs, shows a daily transaction rate of some 8,500 per day.

MAURITIUS ~ Part II

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With the advent of the Defence Communication Network (DCN) and the rationalisations of all three service communication networks in 1969, Mauritius took over an ever greater importance and, together with Gan, became the hub of the DCN network to and from the East of all three services. As the requirements of Government were altered our communications commitments altered too.

A circuit to Majunga was opened during the early days of Rhodesia UDI and the Beira Patrol and the service to Salisbury was closed at the same time! Bombay and Karachi were TARE terminated and after some initial procedural difficulties worked very well. Aden, Bahrain, Diego Suarez and Asmara were closed but circuits with KAF Eastleigh and Diego Garcia were opened. Technical progress also altered the scheme of things. RATT Ship-Shore was introduced and the CW Ship-Shore, very quiet after the closure of the Area Scheme, reduced to just 8 and 12 MHz. Broadcast VR, under the unwieldy title of B11V, became TARE controlled and the MRLs also eventually TARE terminated. The increased use of TARE for the circuits which had previously been at bays high-lighted the need for a review of the complement and TARE outage procedures. A revised MAUOUT procedure was devised and the complement of the station drastically reduced.

Perhaps the writing on the wall for stations such as Mauritius came not only from the defence cuts imposed by successive Governments, but also by the passage of HMS Intrepid through the Indian Ocean in July/August 1970. HMS Intrepid fitted with Skynet, no longer required the traditional communication facilities of Broadcast and Ship-Shore (except when her satellite equipment became defective). Be that as it may, the final withdrawal from the Far East ordered by the Labour Government in early 1975 finally spelled out the demise of HMS Mauritius. Mr. Roy Mason, the Defence Secretary, visited the island in April 1975 to negotiate the termination of the Defence Agreement with the Mauritius Government and the final date of 31 March 1976 was decided upon. Commcen Mauritius closed at 302359Z November 1975 and ended a period of some 13 years of constant communication. By the time of closure our daily traffic load had dropped to under 3000 transactions a day. < early the in cruiser Telegraphist Boy a as served Pike D.G. (SD)(C) Cdr Lt Station, Wireless present of SCO last The island. with link further provided Mauritius, HMS cruiser, Colony old>

In the early 1950s it became apparent that the communication station in Ceylon (GZP) which had served the old East Indies Fleet and the merchant ships of Area III so well for so long, would not be able to continue forever in the newly independent Ceylon. It was therefore necessary to find an alternative location to cover the requirements of the Indian Ocean area and to act as a major relay station for communications between UK and East of Suez. Hitherto all communications between Whitehall, Singapore & Australia had been direct circuits (FX6 and FX22 respectively) and they had suffered a great deal from propagation problems. It was quite usual for FX6 to revert to Morse for long periods during the night. This was obviously not good enough, so a 'mid-way' station was sought. I understand that several locations were considered including Nairobi, already the centre of army communications in East Africa. Presumably political considerations plus an acceptable setting eventually led to the choice of Mauritius in 1957. Building of the new station commenced in 1959 with the transmitter site at Bigara where the 1945 site had been, the receivers at Tombeau Bay and the Commcen itself on the site of the old Commcen and Army HQ at Vacoas. The three stations were linked by landline and by VHF link, the latter being particularly notable as it used the edge of one of the mountains as a reflector.

The first naval personnel arrived in 1960 under the title of Naval Party 1212 (NP1212). AFO 2147/60 decreed that NP1212 would be administered by the Superintendent of Navy Works under CinC SASA. The Wireless Station took over from Ceylon on 28 February 1962 and was commissioned as HMS Mauritius on 19 March 1962 under the command of Cdr D.L. Syms, with Lt Cdr R. B. Keogh as the Executive Officer and Lt (SD)(C) A.E. Howells as the communicator.

HMS Mauritius chief claim to fame at the time of commissioning was the then brand new TARE installation, the first to be fitted in any naval Commcen. This new machine was capable of doing work previously done by any number of operators. However, it was not until much later that it became a great manpower saver as the station had to be complemented to allow all circuits to be terminated manually at bays should the TARE develop faults. Nevertheless it was one of the very first steps in the modernisation and automation of our communications systems and saved a lot of work if not personnel. >

In these early days Mauritius was an extremely busy station. Circuits to Singapore, Gan, Canberra, UK, Cape, Aden and Bahrain were TARE terminated while contact circuits were run with Mombassa, Ceylon, Karachi, Bombay, Asmara and Diego Suarez. In addition a RATT Broadcast (VR) was radiated for suitably fitted ships and a CW Broadcast (VA) run on a time sharing basis at 25 wpm for HM Ships and it would of course be wrong to write about a Wireless Station without mentioning the personnel who have served there and made it such a success. A look through the records shows that RS Jack French, DSM, of Amethyst fame was an RSOW in 1962 while the CRS at the same time was CRS Bill Malaburn who had served in the old cruiser HMS London during the Yangtze incident to try and recover HMS Amethyst. FCRS Parkes, then an RS was also one of the first commission.

The first Wren sparkers, ten in number, arrived on the scene in May 1966. These girls, together with the Nursing Sisters and Naval Nurses provided a touch of glamour to the scene as well as doing a very good job. The local civilian operators, three of whom had done their initial training in Ceylon, also did a first class job. Some of them served in HMS Mauritius throughout the whole period of the establishment's existence

Met communications, previously handled by the Commcen, were taken over by the Mauritian Government and continued to operate on the old B13V and Ship-Shore frequencies under the root call sign 3BA – 3BZ using equipment left behind in good working order at Tombeau and Bigara.

Some signals received on the closing date of the Commcen were as follows:

From : Cinfleet

On this the last day of your radio support of the fleet you can look back with satisfaction on a fine record spanning the last 15 years of RN owned HF communications in the Indian Ocean. There are many fleet communicators with fond memories of Mauritius WT derived from both ends of your circuits and rumour has it that there are still one or two to be found at the reunion who remember the original 1916 stations spark horse. In gratitude as we remember Ceylon West so we will remember you.

From : Commcen Whitehall

The final closure of the last 'RN' major overseas trunk will be felt most strongly by ourselves and all those whom you have served so well. The friendly co-operation provided by your station has been much appreciated. The very high standard of expertise achieved may be emulated by others but will never be surpassed. Good luck to you all and a safe journey home.

From : CDCN

As you cease to be a DCN Commcen and pack your bags we send our appreciated for the important part you have played in the network for many years.