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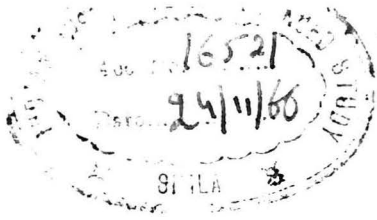


A VISIT TO THE MALDIVE ISLANDS

By GROUP-CAPTAIN H. ST. C. SMALLWOOD, O.B.E.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, September 14, 1960, Sir Philip Southwell, C.B.E., M.C., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: It would be rather impertinent for me to introduce Group-Captain Smallwood, whom we all know so well and who does so much for the Society. He really is a high flyer, is he not? He dashes off to all these places, and now he has excelled everything by his recent visit to the Maldive Islands, about which we are going to hear. I will ask him to address us on this most interesting subject.

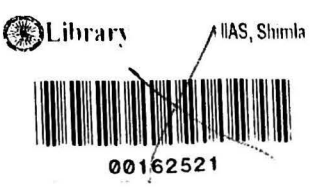
WHEN authors write a book they nearly always offer thanks to various people for giving them information and helping them. Although this is only a very short chapter rather than a book, I should like to say that a great many people have given me a great deal of aid. First of all, the people whom I wish to thank are those at the Commonwealth Relations Office who were extremely helpful to me. Then there were those in the Royal Air Force who remembered an old comrade and treated me extremely well wherever I went. I had the great good fortune of being a friend of Lord Bandon, Air Commander in Chief, Singapore, and his help and welcome in Singapore were most gratifying.

The Maldive Islands, which are liable to be entirely forgotten by the world, are, as you know, a string of little islands in the Indian Ocean about 400 miles south west of Ceylon. They consist of about 12,000 coral atolls, and I suppose one could call 2,000 of those islands. Of the 2,000 islands, only 200 are inhabited. They are typical of all the little islands in that part of the world.

The people are fairly highly civilized. They are a race on their own: very keen explorers, boat builders and fishermen, and, generally speaking, they seem to get quite a lot into their lives. When one first goes there one wonders what is the *raison d'être* of this extraordinary sprinkling of islands on the surface of the ocean. This archipelago was formed by plateaux rising to different elevations from the depths of the Indian Ocean.

In the sixteenth century the Portuguese several times tried to establish themselves on the islands, but without lasting success. The second cross the Maldivian peoples had to bear took the form of pirate raids by the Moplas of the Malabar Coast. In the year 1645 the Maldivians were not very happy because they were liable to be raided by all sorts of people and as an act of self-defence they sent tokens of homage and claims for their protection to Ceylon. To this the Ceylonese responded and there has always been a steady stream of trade between the two places.

As well as being very skilled boat builders—they have three types of boats—the Maldivians weave cloth and, generally speaking, are reasonably self-supporting. There has been a good deal of intermarriage with Indians from Southern India and this has produced a Dravidian type, but Arab



influence is also visible and gives many a Semitic appearance. They are Mohammedans and belong to the Sunni sect. In spite of the fact that the present religious atmosphere is one of Mohammedanism, relics of Buddhistic worship have been found on some of the islands. No one quite knows where they came from, but one may presume they probably came from Ceylon.

This group of islands was originally a sultanate, and only a few years ago the old government was disestablished and the sultanate returned. They had for a short time a republican government, but that did not seem to suit the people very well and the position now is that the Maldivians are quite independent, really, except that they are under British protection and we do look after their foreign affairs for them. Generally speaking, we interfere as little as possible with the general administration of the islands. We are there to help, if necessary.

I want to disavow any suggestion that I am an authority on these far-away islands, because I have only recently made a visit to them. I have not had the advantages of going and living amongst the people. Once you have been to an island it it true that there is not very much more to see. All coral atolls are like one another, and being on one of them is rather like being on any of the 2,000 others. My trip was hasty in that I travelled something like 22,000 miles in sixteen days, almost entirely by air. The trip should not be advocated for anybody who wants a rest-cure. The long flights were rather tiring and it was to a certain extent a relief to find myself back in England.

On the 200 islands, there is a population of something like 93,000 people. The climate is fairly equable, never very hot, never very cold. Sea breezes blow throughout the year and the full force of the monsoon is not felt.

Since 1887 the islands have been a British Protectorate. The people are peace loving. They have expressed the wish that they should become a member of the Commonwealth, and that I think would be a very good thing. They do want a great deal of help, help that we ourselves are perhaps better fitted to give them than almost anyone else. They have their own language but many of them have learnt Urdu, and I was gratified I could talk to many of them, having served in India for a good many years. They are rather like the Cingalese and resemble them to a certain extent.

The importance of these islands has only recently become obvious. We always used Ceylon as an airbase, and when the Ceylon Air Force was formed we were quite politely told that they wanted the place themselves and we had to find somewhere else. We found these islands and an enormous airstrip was constructed there, largely with the help of our good friends Costains, several of whom are members of this Society. This airfield is extraordinary in that it is constructed almost entirely out of the coral of which the island is made. The ready-made materials were on the doorstep.

Their importance has increased considerably since the trouble in Africa. A glance at the map will show you that a route across this part of the Indian Ocean runs parallel with a route that might go across Africa.

Owing to the trouble in the Congo a lot of our communications in that part of the world may be interfered with.

In addition to the big air strip at Gan in the southern group of islands, another strip is being constructed at Malé, which is the seat of government. We have recently sent a British resident, a most esteemed officer, to live at Malé, on King's Island. He was formerly in Gan, but the Maldivians themselves said they would like him to be up at the seat of Government. This officer works under Sir Alexander Morley, who is the United Kingdom High Commissioner for Ceylon. He has an adviser from the Royal Air Force and is in close touch with the Maldivian minister. There used to be a feeling on the part of the Maldivians that our big interest in Gan was inclined to operate adversely; but I think the work that has been done there by Britons has been so good and reliable that they have now accepted us.

At one time the Maldivian official who was in charge in Gan was looked on as a rebel and practically excommunicated. However, better counsels have prevailed and he has now been taken back into favour. He is a very good administrator and the Maldivians would have made a great mistake if they had gone on treating him as if he were a rebel.

As to the commerce of the islands, coconuts grow everywhere and the main trade is in fish. They catch a kind of tunny or bonito. They bury it and when it has reached a sufficient state of putrefaction it is sent to Ceylon, where there is a ready market for this peculiar product. It is in a much more advanced stage than Bombay duck. There is no doubt that the commerce could be increased a great deal, but I think the British Government wisely keep things advancing rather slowly, because we see object lessons all over the world as a result of the mistake of a too rapid advance towards civilization. The copra trade could be increased and improved and with care they could grow still more coconuts. The fish trade could, of course, be improved by the use of steam trawlers.

The medical work carried out by the medical branch of the Royal Air Force is beyond praise. They look after the R.A.F. personnel and they are always helping the people of the islands with their strange complaints. There is a certain amount of malaria there, though not a great deal, and a very nasty disease which is called filariasis which begins with a swelling of the ankles and bring about a nasty fever and is carried by a mosquito. The medical officers go out to the islands, and when it is announced that "the doctor is coming" the people collect to be attended to. The desire for medical attention is such that before a man can go to the doctor he has to get permission from the headman, otherwise the whole village would take up the time of the doctor in a rather wasteful way.

The islands are essentially coral atolls which one sees in many parts of the Eastern seas. Every island which is inhabited has a main street running from end to end. This street is walled with coral blocks, and cross streets run at right angles to the main streets. These roads are well kept up, tidy and clean; certainly there is less litter in them than in the streets of London.

I should like to give you a short account of my journey and I hope it will not sound too much like a Cook's tour. I left Lyneham in Wiltshire

one day, unfortunately rather late, and we had a night stop at Aden. We then went straight back to the aircraft and flew on for Gan, the main airstrip of the Maldives. I was there about a couple of hours before flying on to Singapore, and met the Air Force officer in charge and others I had known in previous times, who made me most welcome.

While I was in Singapore H.M.S. *Gambia* came in. It was commanded by Captain Mann, R.N., and he and all his officers were invited to a party there. I thought it was unlike sailors to want to go to a party where there were no ladies to entertain them, and I asked Lord Bandon what he did about this. He said that he phoned an organization and said, "I have twenty officers coming. Please send twenty women." They worked in offices and were available for parties. They enjoyed the arrangement and the people they entertained enjoyed it too. It was a sensible thing to do.

My pictures cannot convey a great deal to you, but all along the verandahs of the house were hanging orchids of rich and rare varieties. A delicate odour pervades the place which might have originated from the breath of angels. Sprays of oriental blossoms decorate the rooms such as Moyses Stevens and Constance Spry can only have dreamt of. Lady Bandon has the professionals beaten at their own game.

I was awakened at 3 a.m. by a signal from the U.K. High Commissioner in Ceylon saying that it was doubtful if there would be any means of transport for me from Ceylon to Malé. This was a bit of a blow as it meant I should have to confine my visit to the southern group of islands.

On my arrival back at Gan, Arthington-Davy took me over. He was the C.R.O. representative and is a dedicated character giving his whole time, in fact his life, to the Maldivian people. I was allotted an air-conditioned room in the R.A.F. station, which was commanded by Michael Constable-Maxwell, two of whose eight brothers I had known previously.

We went to an island called Fedu in a dohney, a type of boat well suited to these atoll seas. You can row them or sail them and I did more sailing in my few days there than ever in my life before. When trips are made from the main island to the other islands certain products from the N.A.A.F.I. are taken. The benevolent government allows the buying of only certain things, however, because the advance must not be too quick. They do not want money to be wasted on tins of fruit salad and such things which are easily obtainable.

There are two phases of life in the Maldives, the service side and the people. The service personnel are well looked after. There are no women. It is a station where people remain for only six months or a year, and though one might expect them to suffer heavily from boredom, a tremendous amount is done to prevent that. There are cinemas and every game ever thought of is there, and I found very much less boredom amongst the service people than I anticipated. The other aspect of life is looking after the local people, and that is very well done.

On the second day of my investigations I was taken to call on Mr. Afeef, the local Maldivian administrator, and he also seemed a man dedicated to his job. Although once looked upon as a rebel, he was now completely accepted into the body of the government. He was what they

call President of the Council and had a lot of councillors to help him. Each village had its headman.

The three most populated islands in the southern group are Fedu, Maradu and Hitaddu. I spent several days visiting these islands, travelling sometimes in dohneys, sometimes in baggalohs and sometimes in bartillis. These boats travel all the way to Ceylon and back and are surprisingly good sea boats. They take a good deal of navigating. Sailing is the chief way of getting about, helped by the energetic oarsmen, who, though not very robust to look at, are sturdy. They accompany their stroke with songs which are said to be of highly Rabelaisian if not salacious character. The boats, near the water, enable one to see the marine life, particularly the bonito and porpoises.

My next move was to pay a visit to the High Commissioner in Ceylon. In order to do that I flew in a service aircraft, a Shackleton—a machine known for its reliability if not for its comfort—from Gan straight to Ceylon. After sitting in an uncomfortable corner for some time the captain of the aircraft asked whether I would rather not sit up in the front where one got a wonderful view. I accepted this offer and was able to take some snapshots through the Perspex screen at about 6,000 ft. The coloration of the water around the atolls is particularly beautiful.

When I landed I was told that a car was coming to take me to Colombo. I was given a room in the Galle Face Hotel there. It is a sad place compared with what it was some years ago. Then, it was gay, and when a ship came in there was a gala and everyone had a good time. Now it is dreary and down-at-heel. I dined with one of the High Commissioner's staff that night; and next morning the air adviser, Group-Captain Rodney, said he was not going to allow me to stay at the hotel and he wanted me to stay at Trenchard House.

A little while ago I was driving in England and on the screen in the car in front of me, instead of the usual notice "Running In, Please Pass," there was one saying "Running Down, Please Pass." That seemed to express the state of Ceylon today. They were running down and they did not mind who passed. You have only to read the Press to realize the rise in corruption in the Ceylonese government service, and it is a sad place compared with the well-administered place it used to be when I knew it before.

I had a very interesting interview with Sir Alexander Morley and his attractive Viennese wife, and was told that a meeting had been arranged for me with the Maldivian Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Ibrahim Nazir, the next day. I went to see him and he was housed comfortably a little way out of Colombo. He was polite and nice to me and we had a long conversation, through an interpreter. I am told that he understands English very well but prefers not to speak it. He seemed very interested in the people and spoke chiefly of the need for education amongst the Maldivian people. He made the astonishing proposal that when I got back I should induce a lot of female teachers to go there from Great Britain to teach the Maldivians.

I told him that we were not very well supplied with teachers ourselves and I did not think it would be easy to persuade women teachers to go out to Malé. I asked whether anyone else would help and he said some

help came from the Jesuits. When I asked whether they did not try to make converts he said, "No; they do not do that at all. They teach as much as they can and see that people observe their own religion, without trying to convert them." I said that was very admirable and he should try to get some more of the same kind.

I left Ceylon and went back to Gan and had trips round to the various islands. It was a curious thing that wherever we went everything seemed almost exactly the same. On my return to England I was rather surprised that it was not looked upon as at all desirable that I should talk over the radio. The attitude was that as there had not been murder and sudden death it was not of great interest to the British public. I cannot impress upon you too firmly that we have had a tremendous diplomatic success and the more our Commonwealth Relations and our Royal Air Force people are congratulated on it the better.

If we go into a country and subdue it with guns and that sort of thing, everybody is frightfully interested and excited and it is an important thing. But here we have got all we want with the goodwill of the people and it has all been so easy that it is not news. I think that is rather a pity.

On my return from Ceylon I had to wait a few days for a training flight to bring me back to England. This took me in a curious and unexpected direction. First of all we flew straight to Aden, which was normal. As the Britannia was doing a training flight it was decided to go right across Africa, and we flew from Aden, one of the most hideous places in the world, across Lake Rudolf, Kenya, Uganda, Entebbe and Lake Victoria, and across the then peaceful Belgian Congo, flying due west to Kano, the capital of the soon-to-be-independent Nigeria.

We got into Kano at 8.15 and I suffered certain indignities at the hands of a Nigerian corporal whose responsibilities had not taught him civility. He looked at me with great contempt and disfavour and said, "Where is your passport!" I pointed out that I did not need one as it was a British Protectorate. He said, "Show me your passport!" I was advised that he was not in the right but that it would save complications if I did not argue.

We were up at 4.30 the next morning and flew across Libya, the Sahara and French West Africa to the Mediterranean. The island of Malta peacefully nestling in that sea was a geographical eye-opener. We landed and I was met by the local R.A.F. Commandant and taken to lunch in the mess. There we had to wait quite a long time because the Duke of Edinburgh was visiting the island and inspecting his marines. We left very late and got into Lyneham at night after the last train had gone to London, however a kind friend gave me a lift to Reading. I came back tired and happy, full of recollections of a worthwhile trip to these little-known islands. One point I would stress again is the importance of these islands following the outbreak of trouble in Africa. A stopping place on the way to South East Asia and the Antipodes is a thing of great value, and the people who have had the foresight to arrange it merit our best thanks.

Discussion

The Chairman: This talk is about a part of the world we have not all had an opportunity of seeing. Group-Captain Smallwood has said he will

be glad to answer any question you may like to ask him. Perhaps I may ask the first. I understand that so far as the political problems of these thousands of islands are concerned, there is an upper magalis and a people's magalis. Perhaps that question could be enlarged on.

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: I should like to enlarge on it but the seat of government is at Malé which I never actually reached. At one place I saw the number one man hold a ritual council, and presumably that would be repeated in a larger way at Malé.

Mr. LIST: What is the political situation between the British Government and the Maldive Government with regard to flying facilities? Have we perpetual rights to use the Maldive Islands as we will for flying purposes, to the exclusion of all other nations?

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: Not quite. We have a thirty years' lease which I hope in due course will be renewed. Nobody else has shown any desire to go and fly there, but it would not be at all surprising if somebody did. We paid down a certain amount in cash for the lease, and if it comes to a renewal we shall probably produce a lot more cash.

A MEMBER: Do you know why they speak Urdu?

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: It is because of their contact with India. There has been a perpetual traffic between India and the Maldives. Urdu is the lingua franca of India and I suppose its use has been merely a matter of convenience.

Mr. PAXTON: Has there been any victimization of the people who set up an independent republic in the South? They were arrested at one time.

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: There was, to that extent. But, fortunately, complete agreement has been reached and now everybody is happy and together. There is not a rebel government any more.

Mr. PAXTON: Is there a rainy season?

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: It is not a season; it goes on intermittently all the year round. There is no monsoon. There are showers and dry spells throughout the year.

The CHAIRMAN: May we hear a word about money? How many kyat (?) to the £?

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: I believe they have given them up. The money I saw was good old English money.

The CHAIRMAN: Are they on rupees?

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: No; I did not see a rupee.

Mr. M. R. PRICE: Are there many Indians in the country?

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: Only a very few. There are a few Pakistanis and a few Arabs; and a certain group of these people go to Egypt for their education, which I think is a pity.

Mr. PRICE: Are there many Sindis there?

Group-Captain SMALLWOOD: Very few.

The CHAIRMAN: I am sure that we all thank Group-Captain Smallwood for the trouble he has taken in order to give this talk and for the slides. I will ask you to express your appreciation in the usual way. (*Applause.*)