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Scientists fight defence plans for island of Aldabra

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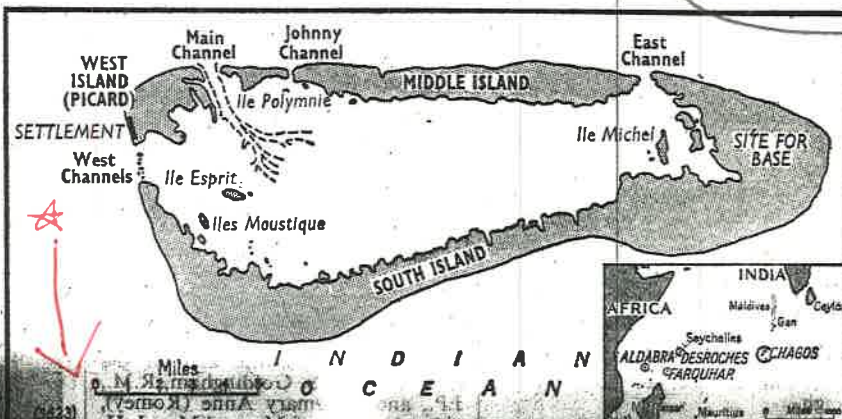
Britain plans to have an amphibious task force of about 8,000 men operating from Australia after the base at Singapore is evacuated during the mid 1970s. In addition to that, a strategic reserve will be based in Britain which will be available to fly troops out as reinforcements to the Far East force, should the occasion require. That strategic mobility will be achieved primarily by a fleet of long-range transports—and a greatly expanded R.A.F. ability to refuel all their aircraft in mid-flight.

There are at present two air routes to the Far East. One is by way of Cyprus, Bahrain and Gan. The other, the west-about route, is across North America and American transit points in the Pacific. The difference between the two routes is about 14 hours in time, but the advantage of the latter route lies in the fact that there are no political inhibitions to military overflights of the kind frequently encountered in the Near and Middle East.

For some years now the Government have been toying with the idea of increasing the number of routes to the Far East by the establishment of more stepping stones in the Indian Ocean, and arguments in favour of this course were accelerated at the time of the cancellation of the aircraft carriers, when the R.A.F. took on responsibility for providing air cover for the Navy over that enormous ocean.

In November, 1965, the Government announced the creation of a new colony called the British Indian Ocean Territory, B.I.O.T., consisting of the islands of Farquhar, Aldabra, Desroches and the Chagos Archipelago, which includes Diego Garcia. "It is intended that the islands will be available for the construction of defence facilities by the British and United States Governments", said Mr. Greenwood, then Colonial Secretary.

The chief attraction of these territories to Britain is their lack of population. Each island has only a few more than 100 people on it and they are mainly migrants—fishermen or guano collectors from Mauritius and the Seychelles. America contributed two-thirds of the cost of the islands, which came to about £5m., and will pay half the costs of any military development of them.



REMOVING THE PEOPLE

M. Leites of B.I.O.T. colonial status. The Government hope to evacuate all local population as soon as construction of the bases is complete. In that way, no doubt, they can adhere to the Prime Minister's often repeated statement that Britain will no longer build or occupy defence bases against the wishes of the local population. In contrast to most other defence policy decisions, the bases will remain and the locals themselves will be removed.

The favourite choice for the first of these staging posts is Aldabra, north-west of Madagascar, which consists of three closely located atolls surrounding a 16-mile long lagoon.

For all its romantic location, Aldabra, in the opinion of most visitors, is a fairly unpleasant spot, but it is a unique island in more senses than one. The Defence Ministry say that it is the only island, geographically and geologically, capable of being converted into an air base. But scientists also maintain that Aldabra is unique and that the island must not be overrun by the military in the way planned.

Within the scientific context Aldabra is unique in many respects. It is an elevated atoll, which is rare in the Indian Ocean where most islands are sea-level atolls. The higher the atoll the wider range of plants and animals which exist upon it and the more valuable it is for scientific study. Aldabra has never been mined for guano and thus, unlike most other Indian Ocean atolls, it has not been stripped of its vegetation and the pure ecology of it has been largely uncontaminated.

Parts of Aldabra have actually been contaminated by human contact. On the West Island there is a small settlement of Seychellois fishermen. Their presence has already resulted in the near extinc-

tion of the Flightless Rail from neighbouring parts of the South Island because of the incursions of cats and rats from the settlement. But most of the rest of the atoll remains unaffected by the settlement, particularly the east end of the island where the giant tortoises live, which also provides the largest breeding ground in the Indian Ocean for frigate birds and one of the few remaining breeding grounds for the green turtle.

The scientists' main argument against the establishment of an R.A.F. base at Aldabra, however, concerns the fact that with the exception of those areas contaminated by the settlement, the rest of the island is undisturbed. Thus Aldabra provides a unique opportunity for scientists to study the island's ecosystem and the ways in which it has evolved over centuries without being affected by any outside influences.

These arguments have been represented forcefully to both British and American Defence Ministers, by the Royal Society, the Smithsonian Institute and the American Academy of Sciences. Their validity is not questioned. What remains to be decided, however, is whether the national security interests of the two countries are so vital in this context that they outweigh the scientific arguments, or whether the scientific requirement for a base at Aldabra is of a low enough defence priority for Government plans to be subordinated to the wishes of the scientific community.

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