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Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia
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I took a circuitous route getting to Diego Garcia. Matt Altman at the Asian Division arranged for me to give a presentation about UMUC to the World Universities Forum (WUF) in Mumbai in January 2009. This put me in Mumbai shortly after deadly terrorist attacks at the train station and a bombing at the Taj Hotel.

The WUF was an opportunity for me to share the work that UMUC's instructors do in a number of conflict areas, such as Afghanistan. Many of the speakers at this conference took strong anti-war, anti-military positions in their presentations. I was glad to be able to present an alternative view with my talk titled *Higher Education: An Agent of Peace, College for U.S. service men and women.*

From Mumbai, it took me two months to travel to Diego Garcia because I had to visit Rajasthan, the Taj Mahal, Varanasi, Darjeeling and various other important cultural sites along my route. Finally, from Kulkata, I flew to Singapore where I met up with Bill Beck. Dr.Beck treated me to a steak dinner at the Singapore Grand Hyatt. Having eaten nothing but Indian food for three months, my stomach didn't know what to do with beef. But I quickly got over it.

From Singapore, Dr.Beck and I flew on a windowless 727 at night to the air strip on Diego Garcia. The reason the flight was at night is because there are so many birds in the air above Diego Garcia that planes cannot take off or land during the day.

Because they have never been hunted or killed, the birds in the Chagos Archipelago are not afraid of humans. They will let you walk right up to them.



Diego Garcia was a tiny UMUC outpost with no administrative staff. As I was the only UMUC representative, I served as both the field rep and the instructor. This gave me a lot of appreciation for how much work field reps did for us instructors.



At Diego Garcia, I taught astronomy and algebra. This was an ideal place to teach astronomy. NSF Diego Garcia is a Ground Based-Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance (GEODSS) observatory, consisting of three high-speed telescopes that track satellites and other objects in space that orbit or pass near the Earth. The one meter diameter telescopes can detect an object in space as small as a basketball at a distance of 20,000 miles. There are similar sites in Hawaii, New Mexico and Spain. Together, these observation posts ensure that the 25,000 man-made objects that orbit our planet don't bump into each other and/or come crashing down on our heads. GEODSS also provides early warning in case an asteroid is going to collide with the Earth.



ASTR-100 students visiting the GEODSS

Diego Garcia is close to the equator so the entire sky is visible from here, from the Big Dipper in the north all the way down to the Southern Cross. With zero light pollution, it's a great place to learn all the stars, planets and galaxies. My students and I were invited to make frequent visits to the GEODSS and to use their telescopes. As an added bonus, the American commander was an amateur astronomer. Prior to my arrival, he had arranged for \$20,000 worth of MWR funds to be invested in telescopes for use by UMUC or any other interested astronomers. Wow!!!

A mildly dramatic incident occurred while I was here. The British commander wanted my assistance one weekend regarding a geologic issue on Danger Island. So, he took me with his security team on patrol.

On patrol with the British Navy near Danger Island



As this was a quick trip, his aide didn't think it necessary to inform the American captain of my absence. When I didn't show up for meals at the mess hall on Saturday or Sunday, an American security team opened my BOQ. They found my bathing suit, mask, snorkel and fins missing and concluded that I'd gone snorkeling in the lagoon and had not returned. Scuba divers were deployed. They didn't find my body.

Here is the view from my BOQ. This is Diego Garcia's exquisitely beautiful lagoon where I snorkeled frequently.



The American captain was about to phone Bill Beck to tell him that one of his professors had drowned. Fortunately, the base communications tech was a student in my astronomy class. He informed the captain what I'd told our class the previous Thursday: I was on Danger Island for the weekend. The rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated.

From Diego Garcia, I returned to Iwakuni to resume my regular teaching assignments there.

Diego Garcia is one of the most inaccessible places on Earth. Tourists are not allowed there. Yachties sailing across the Indian Ocean who wish to anchor in the Chagos Archipelago sometimes have to wait months to get permits to drop anchor in one of the atolls. With no fishing permitted, there are marine wildlife populations, such as turtles and sharks, in numbers not seen anywhere else on Earth. I feel very lucky to have been assigned to Diego Garcia for one term. Thank you very much UMUC for this unforgettable adventure.