

Pine Gap Celebrates 40 Years

Who would have thought that the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap would have been described as like being at a holiday resort? This is one of many fond recollections and stories told to Karen Hamlin during her search of the history of Pine Gap in celebration of its 40th anniversary. [40th anniversary logo]

The Early Years

On 9 December 1966, a treaty agreement was entered into between the Australian and United States Governments regarding the establishment of what was then called the Joint Defence Space Research Facility. After consideration of several locations, Alice Springs was selected, in particular a location through a pass called Pine Gap.

Difficult conditions were faced by those who began construction of the facility in early 1967. As you may not expect in the desert, floods impeded progress during construction making the rugged dirt highway from Adelaide to Alice Springs impassable, also leading to equipment delays. The weather also played havoc in other ways with few creature comforts for the workers who resided in temporary quarters during the building process. The workers had no relief from the sweltering temperatures, with no air conditioned facilities and so had to find their own ways to find relief from the heat. [Construction Photos]

A daily log kept by the contracting supervisor for the construction, recorded that on 10 February 1968, he had to lock the cover to the facility's water tank to prevent 'illegal swimming'. No doubt the arrival of the beer cooler in April that year provided some respite for the workers, who made great headway on the construction in spite of difficult conditions to have the main infrastructure completed in May 1968. The site was open for business on 19 June 1970.

The Good Ol' Days

You may find it surprising to know that just over 50 current staff members have worked at the facility for 20 years or more. The longest serving staff member is Ray Whitwam who arrived at Pine Gap in April 1968. Times were very different back then with Australian and American staff living in separate areas on site. They each had their own bar facilities but as Mr Whitwam recalled, *'Most of the Americans would come and drink in our bar anyway because it was more fun'*. In 1972, the separation between the Australian and American

living arrangements ceased, however, due to the small number of women on site at that time, the women had separate living quarters to the men.

Whilst those interviewed can 'neither confirm nor deny' the following information, many stories of fun and frivolity of living on the facility in the late 60s, early 70s were recalled. Some include a tunnel being dug into the female quarters so the men could sneak into their rooms for parties without the guards seeing, local Alice Springs ladies being hidden in car boots to bring onto site, gentlemen climbing through the roof of the female quarters to find a 'friendly room' and many nights in the facility 'recreation centre' turning into mornings. One thing is certain, times have significantly changed but it seems that there is something special about working at Pine Gap and about living in Alice Springs for so many staff to have remained for so many years.

A Town Like Alice

Alice Springs is also significantly different nowadays but one thing that has not changed is the support the local community has given to the facility. In 1968 Alice Springs only had a population of 6000, there were few services and all roads in and out were unsealed, which demonstrates the remoteness of the location of the new facility. One can only imagine what it was like as an American arriving, site unseen, in the middle of the Australian desert to begin work and a new life. All reports were similar to that of Bob Early who arrived at site in 1969, *'I was really surprised at how well most of the people in town accepted the Americans ... having come half way around the world, I thought ghee this is pretty nice the way I was treated by the Australians'*. There are many reasons given for many staff staying for so long, but they mainly attribute it to enjoying their work at the facility and appreciating the laidback lifestyle in Alice Springs.

Pine Gap has also contributed back to the Alice Springs township, not only economically, but also by being involved in local events, activities and sporting groups. One local event is the Bangtail Muster where floats are paraded and named with their business' initials. Some floats entered by the facility were 'Jim Dandy's Still and Refreshment Factory' in 1969, 'Joint Delivery Submersible Rail Freight' in 1976 and 'Joint Defence Sponsors Rent a Fly' in 1985. [Picture of this float] More recent community involvement includes US Military personnel running 'Bootcamps' for a local gymnasium, involvement in Cancer Council fundraising activities and participation in the Federal Government's *SolarCities* initiative.

What Pine Gap Does

Since the public announcement of the facility in 1967, there has been widespread speculation as to what the facility does and even what it might attract as you can see from the headline in the *Centralian Advocate*, which is the local Alice Springs newspaper on 26 January 1967.

[Headline clipping] The most common and colourful themes about what the facility does appears to be that the site has something to do with UFOs, aliens and submarines. Yes this is despite being located many kilometres from all coastlines of Australia. The origins of these theories are unknown but there is much speculation and there are people who like to add weight to these colourful theories. [Submarine photo]

Colourful theories aside, it is acknowledged that the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap contributes to the national security of both Australia and the United States. by verifying arms control and disarmament agreements and by the monitoring of military developments. Australia also supports the United States in its ballistic missile early warning program through the Relay Ground Station at Pine Gap. This program makes a significant contribution to global security. The facility has seen technical advances, evolving missions and has contributed to the strengthening of an important strategic relationship between Australia and the United States. The importance of this relationship was signified by its name change to the Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap in 1988.

Governmental policy plays a large part in our working life but a joint facility provides an added element with the interactions of international agreements as well as the interaction of Australian and US legal and governmental requirements. An important underlying policy principle of the facility is 'full knowledge and concurrence'. This means that Australia must have knowledge of all activities conducted on its soil and agree to those. Australians are fully integrated into all aspects of Pine Gap's operations, including management of the facility.

Today there are almost 800 personnel at the site, of which just over 50% are Australians. The employees consist of Australian Government personnel (civilian and military Department of Defence and Australian Federal Police), US Government staff (including military personnel) and contractors. When you consider the families of these employees you can understand how the Pine Gap community contributes to about 10% of the population of Alice Springs (approximately 26,000 people).

40 Years Strong

The 40th anniversary of Pine Gap provides a great opportunity to reflect and celebrate past, present and future shared accomplishments. The Deputy Chief of Facility, Michael Burgess on behalf of senior leaders of the facility would like to express thanks and acknowledge the dedicated efforts of many individuals who have quietly safeguarded both nations through the Cold War and beyond. Mr Burgess would also like to extend an appreciation to the local Alice Springs community for their ongoing support. Major 40th anniversary celebrations are occurring on 21 and 22 September 2007.