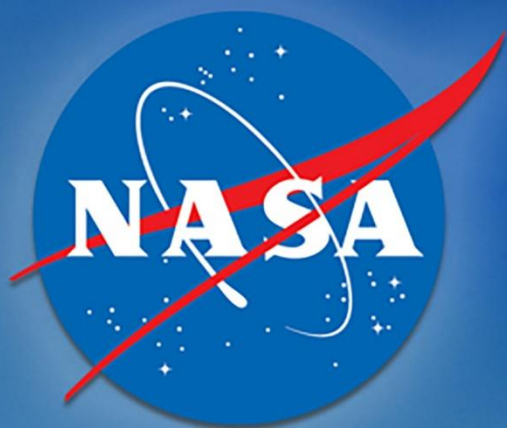
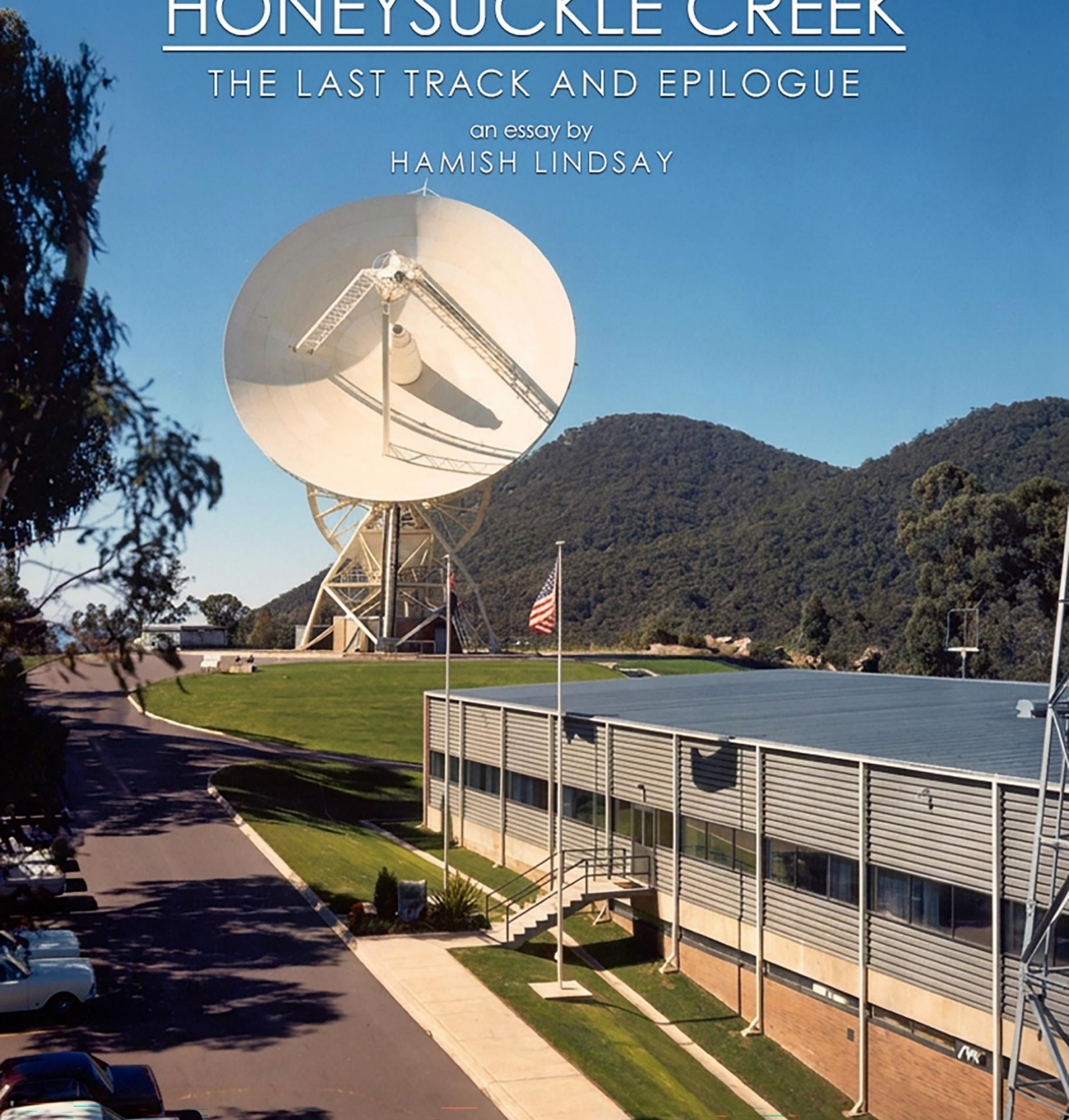


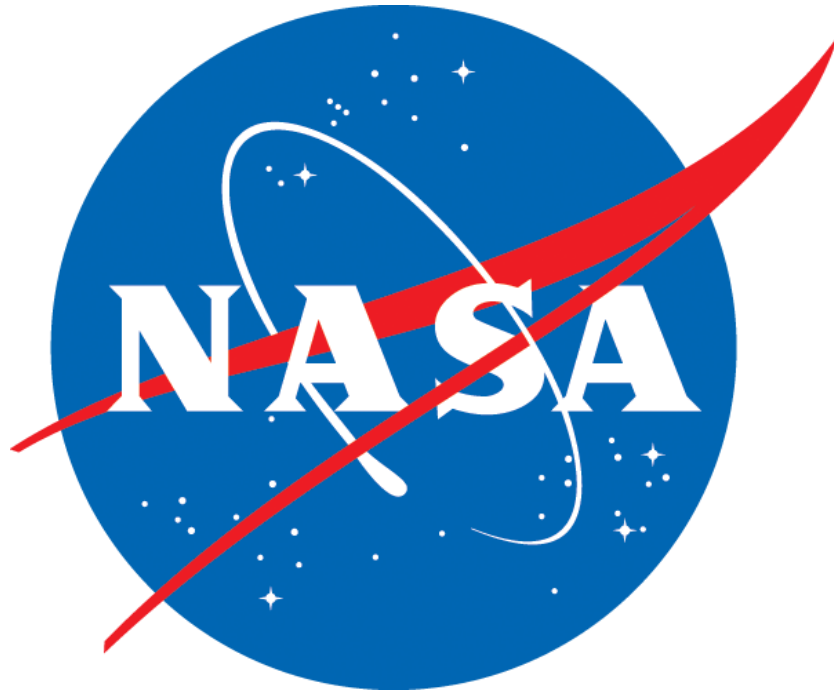


HONEYSUCKLE CREEK

THE LAST TRACK AND EPILOGUE

an essay by
HAMISH LINDSAY





*“The name Honeysuckle Creek and
the excellence which is implied by that name,
will always be remembered...”*

Christopher C. Kraft Jr. Director
NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas

HONEYSUCKLE CREEK

THE LAST TRACK AND EPILOGUE

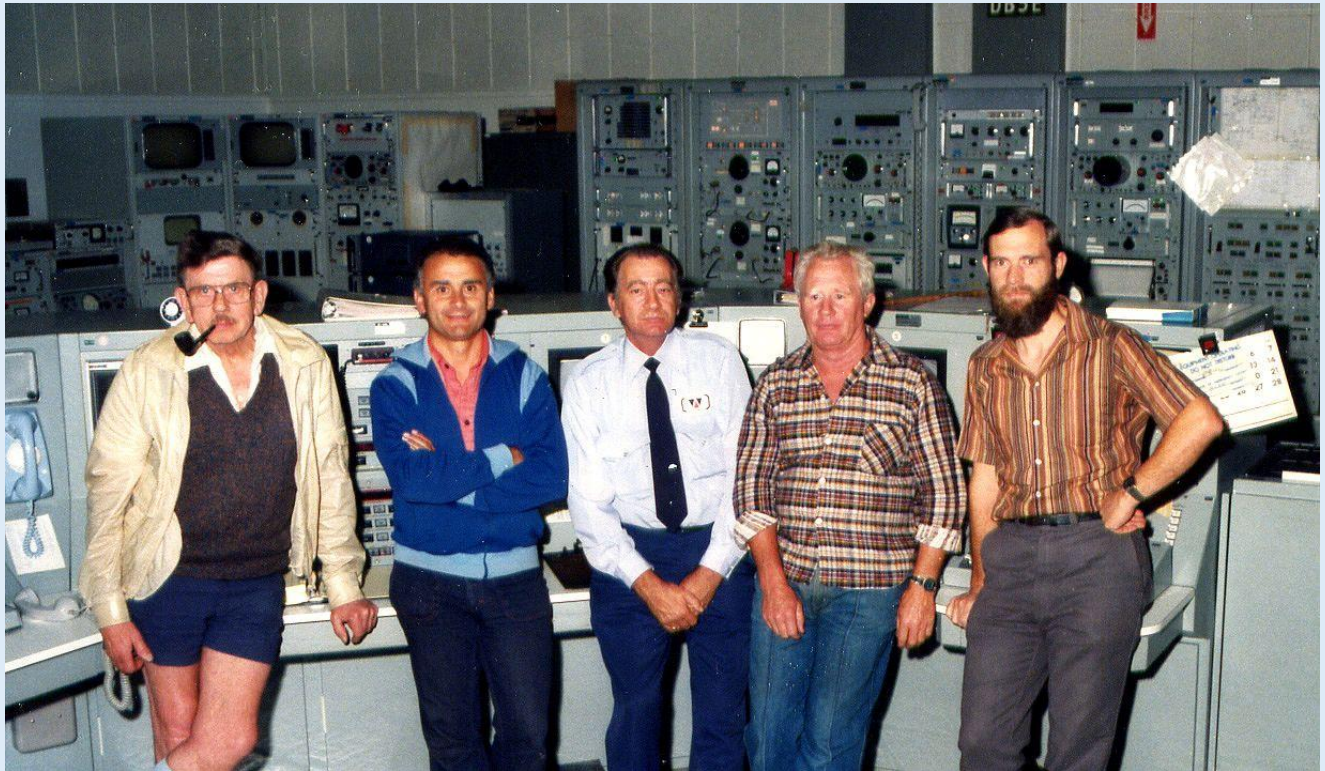
Extracted from content available on the
Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station
website, developed by Colin Mackellar
www.honeysucklecreek.net

Click or scan the QR code below to see the website:





Hamish Lindsay signing a copy of his book at Tidbinbilla on 22 July 2015.



The last track by DSS44 in which Hamish Lindsay took part – 23 November 1981. Photo: Hamish Lindsay.
From left: Ken Staff (Powerhouse); Tony Gerada (Shift Supervisor); Jeff Jennings (Security Guard);
Brian Eagleton (RF and Receivers); and Hamish Lindsay (RF and Servo).

HONEYSUCKLE CREEK THE LAST TRACK



I had been on night shift when the phone rang at about 0745, shortly before we were due to go home. It was Terry Dinn, the Security Guard, to say that the Company Manager Jim Thompson was on site. Jim Thompson promptly called a meeting of everyone in the Conference Room.

After Geoff Ruck and his crew arrived to start their shift at 0800, Jim opened the meeting with a letter from the Department of Science.

It was brutal and to the point: All 26 metre sites were to be closed down at Goldstone, Madrid and Canberra from (Tuesday) 1 December 1981. The Department expect they may be able to find jobs, probably with a demotion, though there was talk that even Tidbinbilla and the whole DSN (Deep Space Network) might be closed down.

Luckily the last threat did not eventuate, but the final days were quite depressing as we all contemplated our futures.

The remaining staff continued tracking Helios and Pioneer 12, with some Pulsars for the CSIRO thrown in, until Sunday 15 November when I had my last shift as a Shift Supervisor on days.

This time my memories are melancholy.

In the morning we tracked Helios 1 while on our commercial television we watched STS-2, the second flight of the Shuttle end, as Joe Engle and Richard Truly brought Columbia down to land.

Then Chef Reno excelled himself and gave us a superb lunch to make us feel better – Minestrone soup, Roast Chicken and Veal washed down with a nice white wine, followed by apple pie and cream to finish.

All for the normal price of 90 cents!

In the afternoon while tracking Pioneer 12 orbiting Venus we had the cricket on the television – the First Test with Australia playing Pakistan at the WACA in Perth, with Kim Hughes and Bruce Laird batting for us all afternoon (we won by 286 runs).



Boxing the many kilometres of cables.

Tony Gerada (left), Paul Hutchinson and Les Hughes, with Geoff Ruck just visible on the far right.

But we could also hear the ominous sounds of furniture and equipment being carried out of the building to waiting trucks.

Despite the gourmet lunch and homely television there was an uncomfortable feeling of foreboding and gloom.

Obviously the end was near for HSK/DSS44.

My last track at Honeysuckle Creek was on (Monday) 23 November with Tony Gerada and Brian Eagleton on night shift for a Helios 1 pass.

Uncharacteristically we erased the whole HA48 predicts and Track had to send the floaters again. Then it was just a quiet, nominal pass.

As it was the night shift from midnight to 0800, we only had Ken Staff in the powerhouse and Jeff Jennings down in the guard hut; we were the only people on the site. It was a subdued team that said farewell to each other and drove down the mountain that morning.

Then came the final track – the very last track of all – on 2 December 1981.

DSS44 supported pass 1279 of Pioneer 12, orbiting the planet Venus. Pioneer 12 was the Pioneer-Venus Orbiter, a companion for the Pioneer 13 Venus Multiprobe which we had tracked into the Venusian atmosphere on 9 December 1978. Over a decade later Pioneer 12 burned up in the Venusian atmosphere on 8 October 1992 when it ran out of fuel.



Pioneer (12) Venus Orbiter. Artist: Paul Hudson



Paul Mullen writes:

"The track was not that remarkable as it went off smoothly. After it was over, I had the feeling that we were let down – but progress had to take place. I was on the desk at the time, and I had asked Tom Reid's permission to play the Last Post."

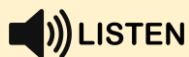


Tony Gerada writes:

"We were in the same shift, a few other techs and me in the Ops chair, which supported the last HSK track. I still have a recording (below) getting a briefing from Track (JPL) and Tracking etc."

Listen to part of the Last Track

You can hear Tony Gerada on this recording as HSK/DSS-44 receives 'predict' data for the pass of Pioneer 12, and Honeysuckle's last track.



1.9mb mp3 file. Running time: 3m 16s



After Paul broke track and punched the switch to send the antenna to the stow position for the last time ever, Station Director Tom Reid and Shift Supervisor Tony Gerada stood by the operations console while Paul played the 'Last Post' over the network and DSS 44 Honeysuckle Creek was no more.

The data and voice links from Honeysuckle Creek operations over the Deadman's Hill passive repeater to Tidbinbilla and the world beyond, fell silent for the first time in 14 years.

After the last track, Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station, alias HSK and DSS44, designed and built specially for the Apollo Moon landings, was completely shut down.

A small team remained to dismantle and remove the equipment, the cables were pulled out, and we walked out the door, leaving just an empty building.

During December the electrical power was turned off, the Caterpillar diesels put to bed and prepared for sale. The deserted buildings became dark and fell silent. The antenna servos no longer whined into the night. The clients of the best restaurant for kangaroos in the district were left to dine on the grass in peace.

Honeysuckle Creek simply faded away – there were no farewells, no speeches, no parties, no wakes. Nobody cared.

The last of us left who had put money into farewell presents for departing staff members for all those years, gave ourselves inscribed silver mugs as a memory.

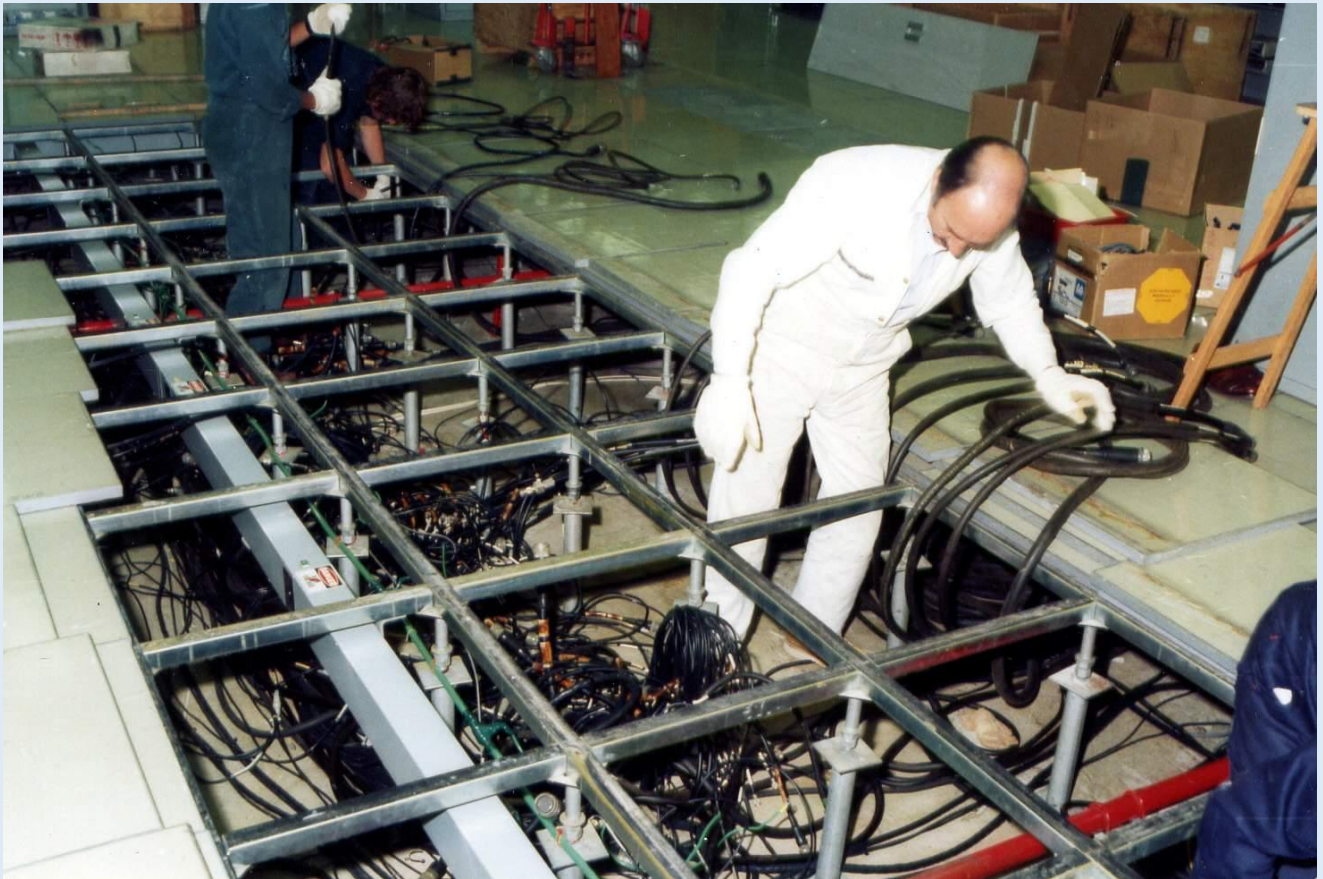
During its short but glorious life, Honeysuckle Creek had distinguished itself as a top station around the world in two completely different spheres; as a Manned Space Flight Station attached to the Mission Control Center in Houston, Texas; and then as a Deep Space Station attached to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.

Vale Honeysuckle Creek.

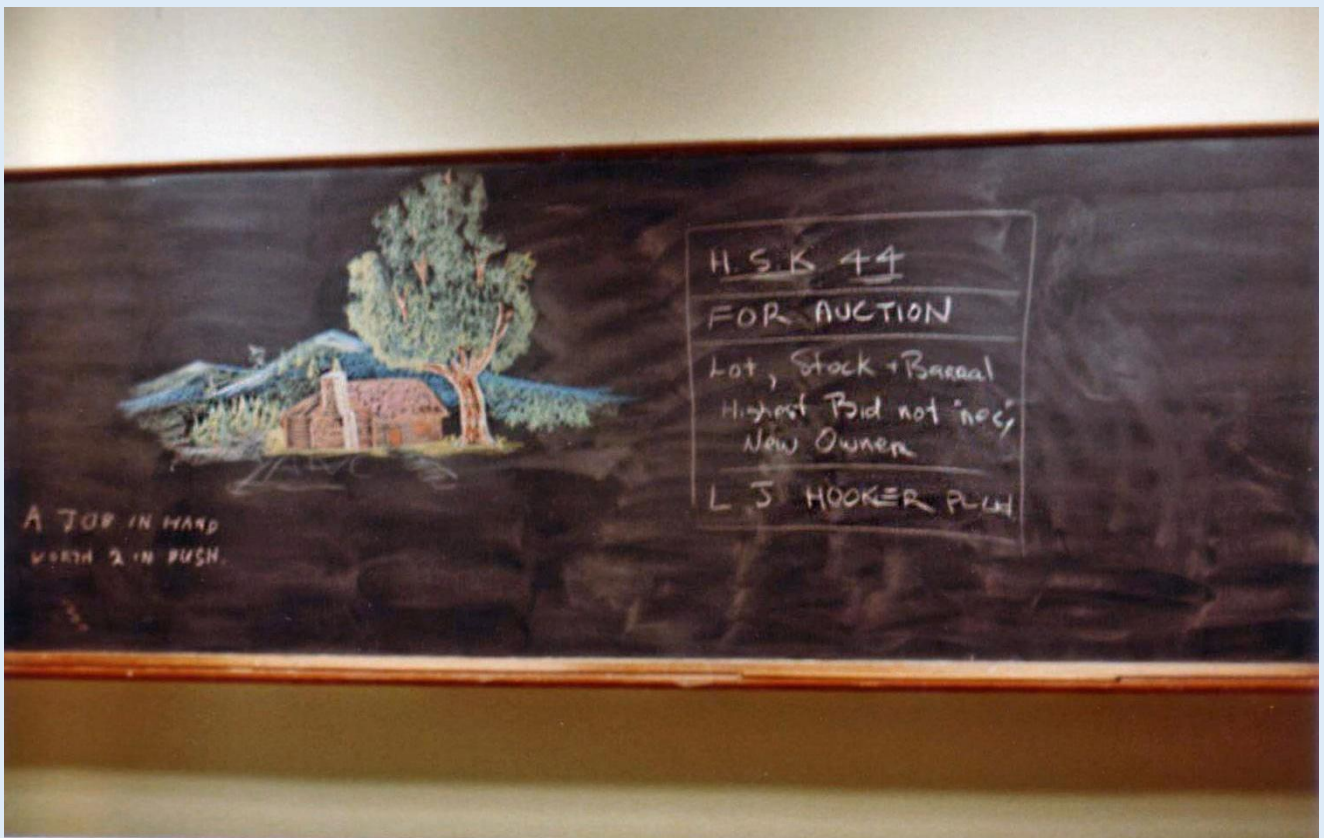




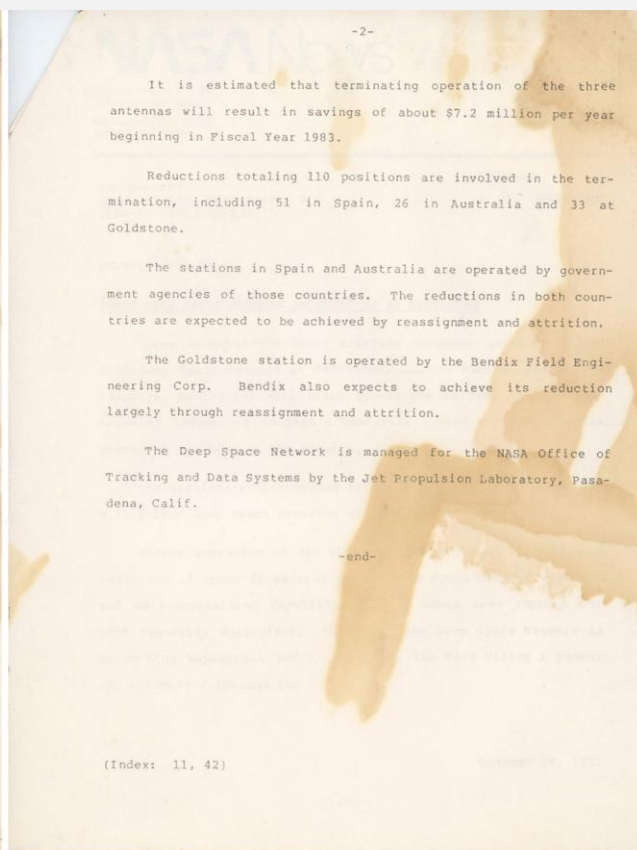
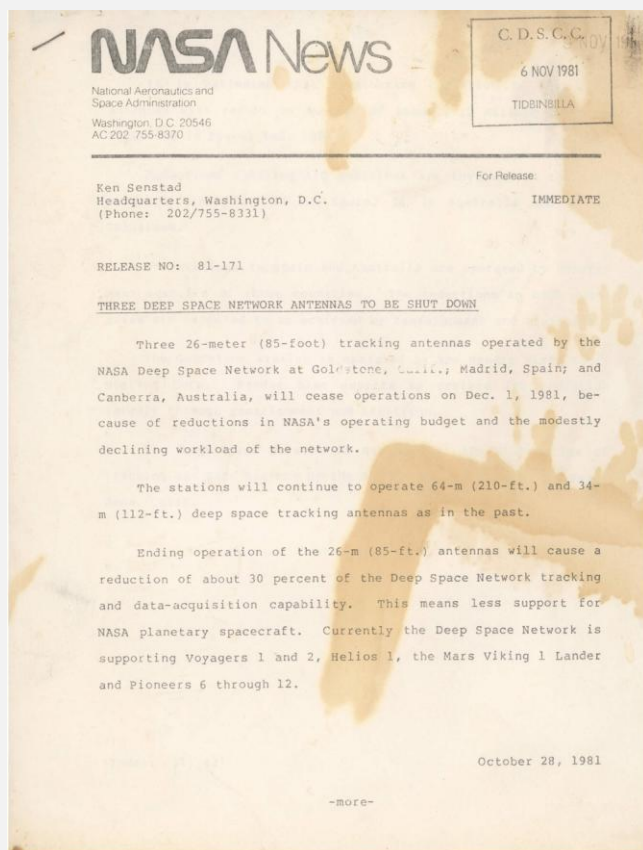
Staff removing cables under the plenum - Alex Sommeriva facing camera.
The Receivers have been removed. The Servo console is visible in the background.



Len Litherland making headway through a tangle of cables. Boxes for shipment gathering in the background, The underfloor plinth area for the cables is clearly visible in this photo.



On the blackboard in the Conference Room, Laurie Turner left this chalk drawing with notes reading: "A job in hand (is) worth 2 in bush." and "HSK 44 For Auction. Lot, Stock & Barrel. Highest Bid not 'noc' (not knocked down), New Owner. L J Hooker Pty Ltd (Australian real estate agent)". Photo: Scott Hendry



NASA press release dated 28 October 1981, carries the sad news.

Preserved by Hamish Lindsay. Scan: Colin Mackellar

It reads:

Three Deep Space Network Antennas To Be Shut Down

"Three 26-meter (85 foot) tracking antennas operated by the NASA Deep Space Network at Goldstone, Calif.; Madrid, Spain; and Canberra, Australia, will cease operations on Dec. 1, 1981, because of reductions in NASA's operating budget and the modestly declining workload of the network.

The stations will continue to operate 64-m (210-ft.) and 34-m (112-ft) deep space tracking antennas as in the past.

Ending operation off the 26-m (85-ft) antennas will cause a reduction of about 30 percent of the Deep Space Network tracking and data-acquisition capability. This mean less support for NASA planetary spacecraft. Current the Deep Space Network is supporting Voyagers 1 and 2, Helios 1, the Mars Viking 1 Lander and Pioneers 6 through 12.

It is estimated that terminating operation of the three antennas will result in savings of about (US) \$7.2 million per year beginning in Fiscal Year 1983.

Reductions totalling 110 positions are involved in the termination, including 51 in Spain, 26 in Australia and 33 at Goldstone.

The stations in Spain and Australia are operated by government agencies of those countries. The reductions in both countries are expected to be achieved by reassignment and attrition.

The Goldstone station is operated by the Bendix Field Engineering Corp. Bendix also expects to achieve its reduction largely through reassignment and attrition.

The Deep Space Network is managed for the NASA Office of Tracking and Data Systems by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, Calif."

-end-

NBE003A
 RR ACSW ASFA DSDF DSDN GFDA GSRM GTWL HMSC
 DE ANBE 003A
 30/0157Z
 FM ALL STATION STAFF/HONEYSUCKLE CREEK TRACKING STATION
 TO
 INFO ACSW/J WARTH
 ANRC/R LESLIE
 ASFA/C QUIGGIN
 DSDF/STADIR/OPS/TDA REPS
 DSDN/STADIR/OPS
 GFDA/T ROBERTS
 GSRM/E SMILEY/C TAYLOR/W WOOD/R HORNSTEIN
 GSTS/CODE 800 R SADE/W LAFLEUR/CODE 810 R OWEN/CODE 812 D DALTON/
 CODE 850 D SPINTMAN
 GTWL/CODE 861.2 M STEVENS/CODE 862.3 R STANLEY
 HMSC/C KRAFT/E PENDELL/L ARMSTRONG
 JGLD/C KOSCIELSKI
 JHIL/M WYATT
 JJPL/P LYMAN/G REED/R K MALLIS/R LATHAM/J K HEFTMAN
 JOCC/OPS CES/TRK CES
 LRDO/BAUTISTA
 LRID/J URECH

SUBJ: HONEYSUCKLE CREEK (DSS 44) STATION SHUTDOWN
 NEARLY 16 YEARS IS A VERY SHORT PERIOD IN HISTORICAL TERMS, BUT
 QUITE A LARGE SLICE OF THE SHORT HISTORY OF SPACEFLIGHT.
 MANY OF US HAVE BEEN AT HONEYSUCKLE FOR MOST OF THAT PERIOD, AND
 ARE PROUD THAT WE HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN A SMALL WAY WITH SOME OF THE
 MOST INTERESTING AND EXCITING EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF MANKIND.
 WE COULD QUOTE STATISTICS, BUT PERHAPS JUST A FEW OF THE HIGHLIGHTS
 MIGHT ILLUSTRATE WHAT WE WILL MISS.
 THE FIRST ORBIT OF A MANNED SPACECRAFT AROUND THE MOON (APOLLO 8).
 MAN'S FIRST STEPS ON THE LUNAR SURFACE (APOLLO 11).
 THE ACTIVATION OF THE FIRST VEHICLE ON THE MOON (APOLLO 15), AND ALL
 THE ASSOCIATED SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATIONS.
 THE HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL SUPPORT OF THE VERY COMPLEX SKYLAB MISSIONS.
 SINCE 1975 WE HAVE BEEN LUCKY TO HAVE JOINED THE DEEP SPACE NET AT A
 TIME WHEN VIKING LANDED ON MARS, THE VOYAGER AND PIONEER SPACECRAFT
 ARE EXPLORING THE OUTER PLANETS, AND TO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THESE
 PROJECTS ALSO.
 WE HAVE TRIED TO ACT IN A RESPONSIBLE AND PROFESSIONAL WAY, AND AT
 TIMES WE MAY HAVE SEEMED TO DISPLAY A TYPICALLY AUSTRALIAN PRAGMATISM
 IN OUR APPROACH. IN FACT THE MAJORITY OF US ARE IDEALISTS ON THE
 SUBJECT OF SPACE, AND HATE TO THINK THAT AMERICA MAY BE TURNING HER
 BACK ON EXPLORATION, FOR EVEN A LIMITED PERIOD.
 THOSE OF US WHO ARE LEAVING THE INDUSTRY SEND BEST WISHES FOR THE
 FUTURE TO OUR FRIENDS AT JPL, GODDARD, HOUSTON AND THE OTHER TRACKING
 STATIONS, PARTICULARLY TO THOSE WHO ARE ALSO LEAVING FROM DSS 11 AND
 62. IT'S BEEN GOOD WORKING WITH YOU.

30/0200Z NOV 81 ANBE

At the shutdown John Saxon wrote, and Honeysuckle's final Station Director, Ian Grant, sent this TWX (Network message) to many with whom the Honeysuckle team had worked with over the years.

Preserved by Ian Grant

It reads: **SUBJ: HONEYSUCKLE CREEK (DSS 44) STATION SHUTDOWN**

"Nearly 16 years is a very short period in historical terms, but quite a large slice of the short history of spaceflight.

Many of us have been at Honeysuckle for most of that period, and are proud that we have been involved in a small way with some of the most interesting and exciting events in the history of Mankind.

We could quote statistics, but perhaps just a few of the highlights might illustrate what we will miss.

The first orbit of a manned spacecraft around the Moon (Apollo 8). Man's first steps on the lunar surface (Apollo 11). The activation of the first vehicle on the Moon (Apollo 15), and all the associated scientific explorations. The highly successful support of the very complex Skylab missions.

Since 1975 we have been lucky to have joined the Deep Space Net at a time when Viking landed on Mars, the Voyager and Pioneer spacecraft are exploring the outer planets, and to have contributed to these projects also.

We have tried to act in a responsible and professional way, and at times we may have seemed to display a typical Australian pragmatism in our approach. In fact, the majority of us are idealists on the subject of space, and hate to think that America may be turning her back on exploration, for even a limited period.

Those of us who are leaving the industry send best wishes for the future to our friends at JPL, Goddard, Houston and the other tracking stations, particularly to those who are also leaving from DSS11 and 62. It's been good working with you."



Photo taken towards the end of the Deep Space Network era. Photo: Scott Hendry
From left: Scott Hendry, Pete Gavin (RF); Tony Gerada (Digital); and Tony Salvage (Supervisor).

HONEYSUCKLE CREEK EPILOGUE

Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station, built specially for the Apollo Moon landings, closed its doors for the last time in December 1981 – and simply faded away.

There were no farewells, no speeches, no parties, no wakes. All the equipment was removed, we pulled the last of the cables out, stacked the boxes, and walked out the door. During its short but glorious life, Honeysuckle Creek distinguished itself as a top station around the world in two completely different spheres – as a Manned Space Flight Station attached to the Mission Control Center in Houston, Texas, and then as a Deep Space Station attached to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.

I visited the building a few years after it had been closed. It had been attacked by vandals – smashed panels, broken bricks, and litter lay around the floors. I walked down the main corridor, and remembered the many times I had walked down it, carrying a Styrofoam cup of coffee to the sound of voices on the Moon's surface, or running down to the canteen for a quick meal.

I stood there for a while – looking at the slight glow of daylight from the one window looking out on the old antenna pad, throwing just enough sombre, grey light over the floor, walls and ceiling to make out the rooms.

The middle rooms, including the Telemetry and Computer areas, were empty black cells.

To anybody else it would have been the silence of a graveyard – the thick windowless walls of the equipment areas blocked out all sounds of wind and rustling leaves and the world outside. But.... to me, the silence was alive with sounds. From the recesses of my mind came the larger than life characters and amazing events of the Honeysuckle era. Every corner, every spot, even above the ceiling and under-floor plinth area had its memories of people and events.

In the very beginning, in the winter of 1966, before the sealed access road was built, it was a cold, wild trip up to the station, sometimes taking many hours to get to work. One day I left home at 0700 and didn't begin work until 1000.



Above: Honeysuckle Creek in October 1980. Photo: Bill Wood from the Goldstone station.

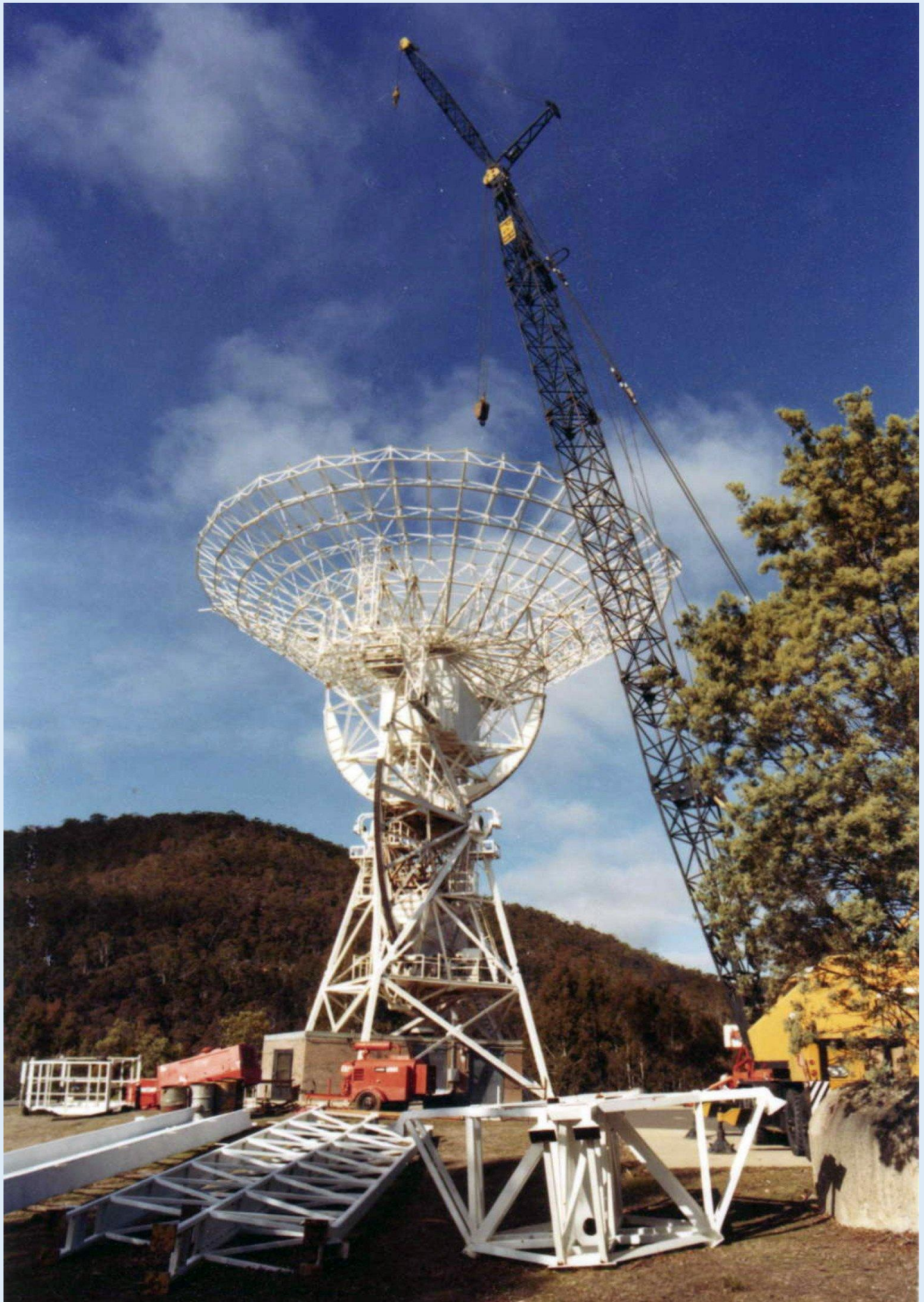
Below: Compare the above photo, to the one taken by Chris Hendry of Scott Hendry when they visited not long after the station closed.

The antenna and the microwave tower are gone, along with the US and Australian flags.
Also missing are all the people who worked at Honeysuckle Creek.





The Honeysuckle antenna is stripped of its reflector panels, as deconstruction begins. Scan: Glen Nagle

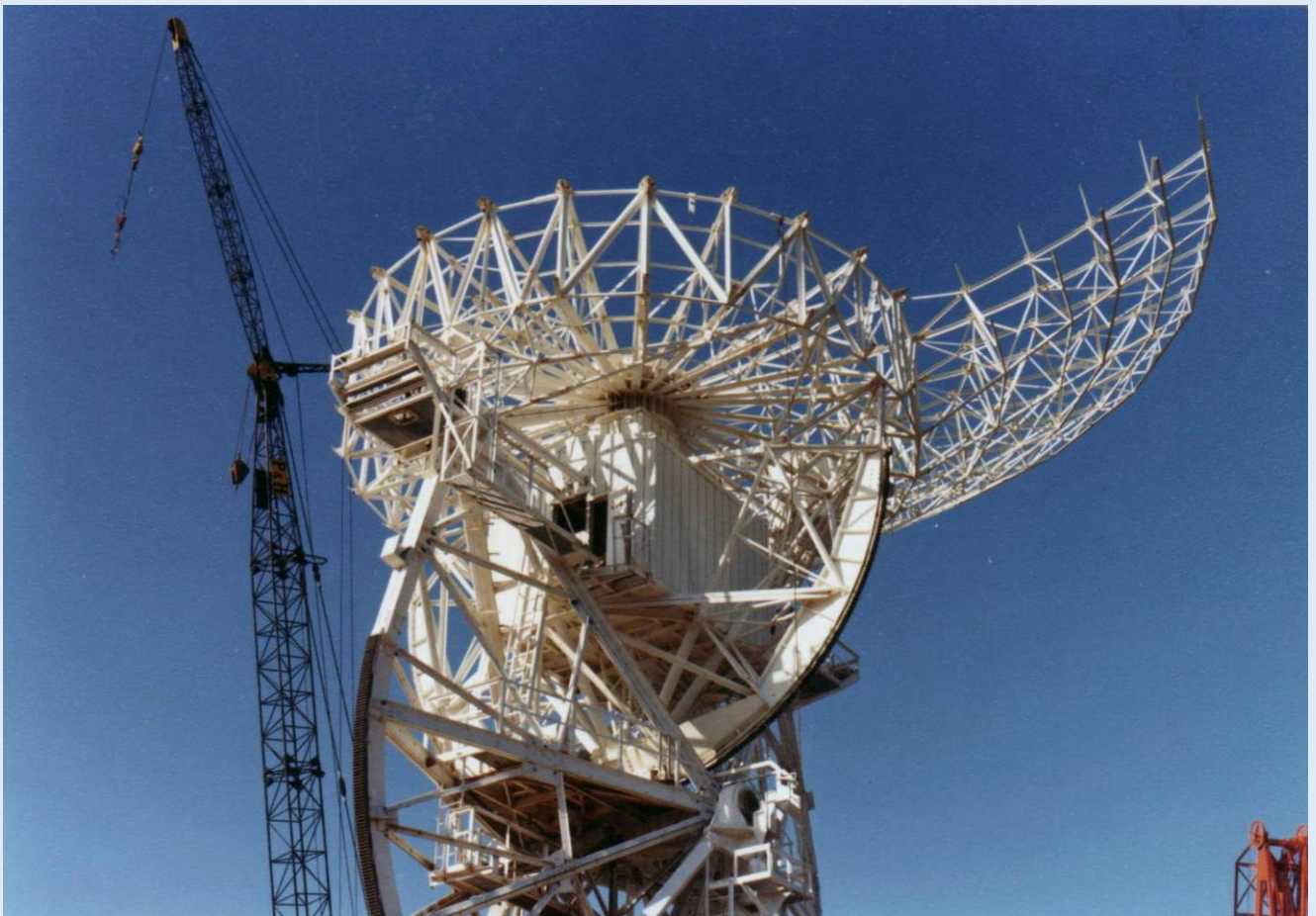


Parts of the quad-leg structure and sub-reflector assembly lay on ground, as a crane prepares to continue removing parts of the antenna structure.
Photo: Paul Hutchinson



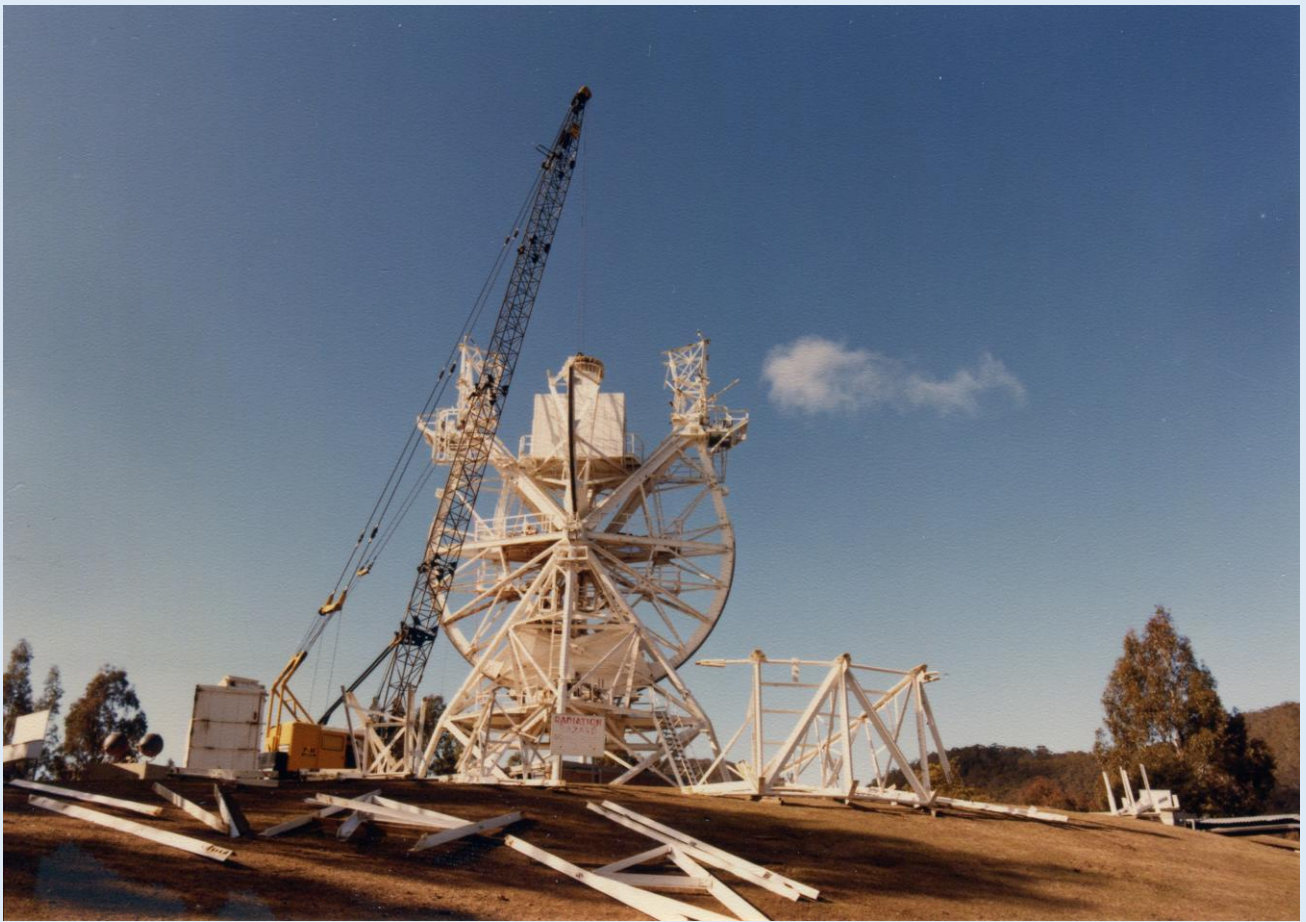
Above: The reflector structure being dismantled in this elevated view looking in the direction of Apollo Road, shrouded in fog. Scan: Glen Nagle

Below: Another view from the ground as the reflector structure is removed.
Photo: Paul Hutchinson





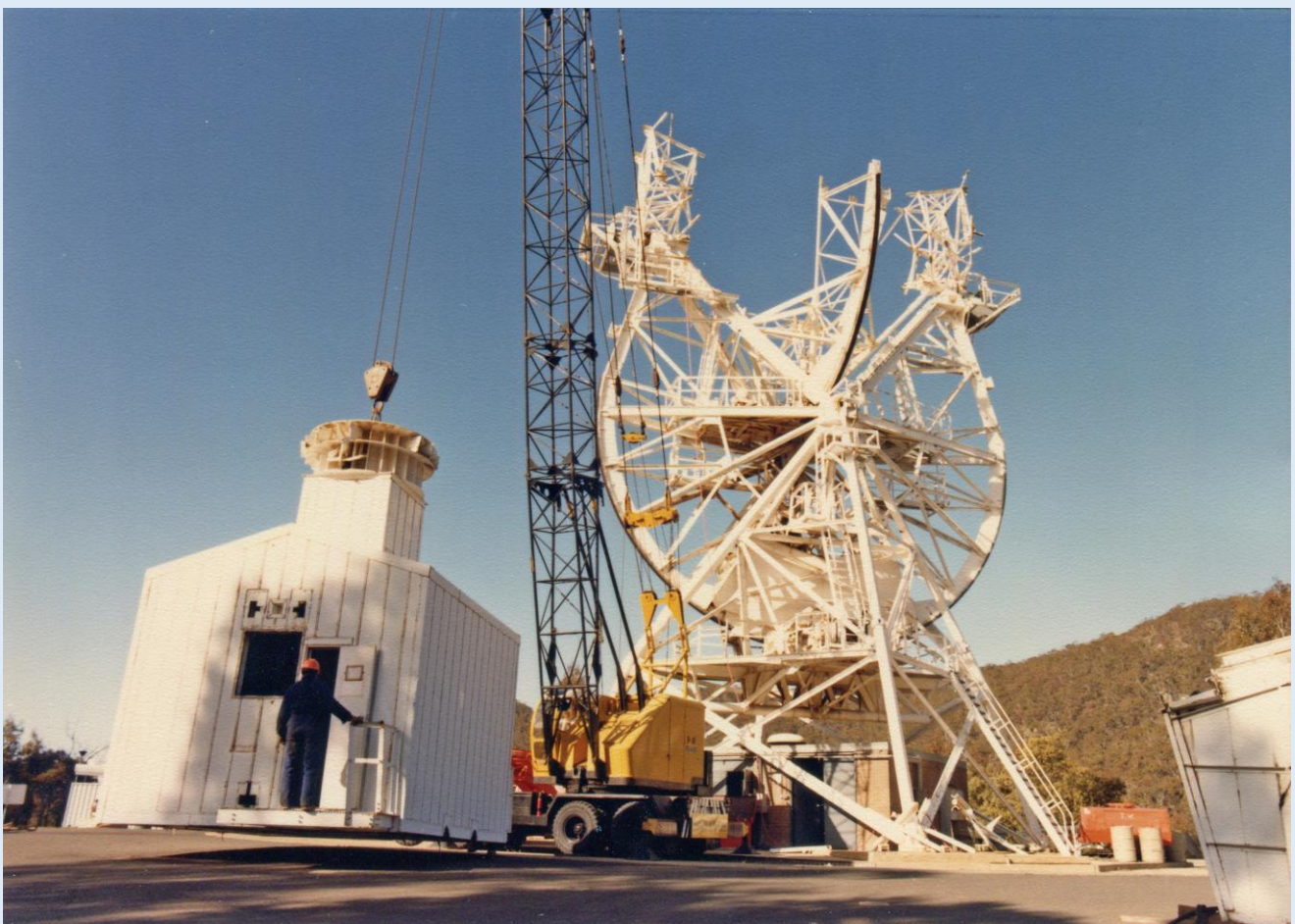
The antenna structure stripped down to the core structure. Photo: Paul Hutchinson
Each part of antenna DSS-44 was numbered and colour-coded to allow for parts to be shipped to the Tidbinbilla station for re-assembly, reconfiguration, and a new life as DSS-46.



Above: The electronics housing cabin is prepared for lift and removal by the crane.

Photos: Paul Hutchinson. Scans: Glen Nagle

Below: The electronics housing cabin is set on the ground.





The electronics housing cabin is removed from the antenna.
Photo: Paul Hutchinson

Photo digitally cleaned using AI.



Hamish Lindsay (circa 1967) after starting at Honeysuckle Creek.

Photo extended and colourised: Glen Nagle

My first day at Honeysuckle Creek was Wednesday 13 July 1966, exactly three years before Apollo 11.

We would drive in Ford Falcon sedans to the bottom of the mountains, and transfer into four-wheel drive vehicles for a rough trip up a rutted track to the empty buildings.

Some tried to get their cars up by letting the tyres down and filling the trunk with rocks, or putting snow chains on. Many slithered off the track, sometimes side-swiping other cars already stranded, and had to be manhandled back, and some were gunned over the bad parts, sliding all over the place before sump-scraping to a halt on the deep frozen ruts to wait for the four-wheel drive to pull them out.

I left the Gemini Tracking Station at Carnarvon and had just arrived from a three month course at Collins Radio in Dallas, Texas, to join the other members of the station staff recruited from all over the world, from all walks of life.

We began to find out about ourselves, aware we would soon have to be working as a team on this great adventure, but really had no idea of what was in store for us. At the time Apollo missions were only ideas on paper.

At first we worked on discarded packing-case work benches and furniture, while Betty and Horrie Clissold in the canteen tried to make the bare building a home for us.

The antenna itself was built, but couldn't move as there was no equipment on the station to control it. The first loads of equipment arrived and with it came the American contract technical staff to install it, under John Talbot, the NASA engineer assigned to Honeysuckle to supervise the installation.

The biggest team was the Collins Radio crew under their leader, the reserved Ray Cox. They installed all the USB equipment, which included antenna control, cabling, receivers, transmitters, demodulators, timing and ranging equipment.

When all the equipment was installed and checked out, along came the NASA Super Constellation aircraft and the ground simulation teams led by George Harris to teach us their unique operational procedures. We did not do very well at first, and had to have a big staff shake-up before we began to pull together as an efficient team.

By this stage we had a pet kangaroo which became so lazy that when the food was brought



Station Director Tom Reid (left) and Goddard's George Harris with the station's "lazy" mascot kangaroo.
Photo: Hamish Lindsay. Scan: Colin Mackellar

to where it was lying, it would not get up, but merely moved its head to feed from the bowl.

We were experiencing quite the reverse, our tempo was warming up as the Apollo program began to recover from the disastrous Apollo 1 fire, and we went into the Earth orbiting Apollo 7, our first manned mission.



Apollo 8

Apollo 8 was only our second manned flight, and we thrilled to the excitement of supporting the first humans to leave the Earth's environment and head for another world. This was the first time the bigger 26 metre stations' capabilities were needed, and we joined Goldstone and Madrid as prime stations, handing Apollo 8's signal to each other as the world turned under the Moon. We welded into a team with a single purpose, a purpose we could now readily define.

Apollo 11

Then came Apollo 11 and our moment of glory when we passed on to a breathless world those first steps on the lunar surface by Armstrong.



After the euphoria of the Apollo 11 landing, came the jubilant sounds of the astronauts hopping and driving around on the moon's surface with their dissonant intercom voices full of the excitement of their experiences. Looking back now, I felt at the time it seemed quite normal to be walking and driving around the Moon.

It was part of everyday life on Earth, and soon became just another odd news item in the media. We started to forget the mission dangers and failures, though we were aware that Moon missions were coming to an end.



Apollo 13

Then Apollo 13 came along to remind us that life-threatening dangers were always looking over the astronauts' shoulders, waiting for an opportunity to move in.

I was at my mission station at the Ranging System, which measured the speed and distance of the spacecraft, when I heard Swigert's call, *"Hey, Houston – we've had a problem here."*



The Honeysuckle antenna focuses on the Moon during the Apollo 15 mission. Photo: Hamish Lindsay

None of us were aware of what was to come with that call. Our signal had dropped suddenly, and the receiver operators were fighting to keep locked onto the spacecraft. My Ranging System was dropping in and out of lock with the ratty signal, which turned out to be coming from the small omni antenna on the spacecraft.

I listened to the rapid exchanges between Mission Control and the astronauts as they tried to identify the problem. When the call came requesting Parkes, we knew it must be a serious problem. We then went on to play a major part in finding a solution to the Saturn IVB and LM signals on the same frequency, and keeping in contact with the crippled spacecraft. We lived every minute of that perilous journey home.



Apollo 15

We were officially Prime station for Apollo 15, the first of the scientific J missions. This was our mission, the first mission using a

Lunar Rover vehicle. We gave a faultless [tracking and communication] performance.

I was taking an evening meal break and walked outside to get some fresh air. The mountains were dark and silent. The sun had just sunk below the horizon leaving behind a deep indigo blue sky, and the floodlit antenna was locked onto the signal from the Lunar Module Falcon sitting on the Moon's surface.

Ignoring me, kangaroos were quietly cropping the grass beside me.

I looked at the Moon behind the antenna, and turned to look through the window into the brightly lit USB room, and there was a television monitor showing Dave Scott, who I had met at Carnarvon, and Jim Irwin bounding around the lunar surface.





Staff heading to the bus after the road slid into the valley, February 1971. Photo: Hamish Lindsay

A Great Adventure

I felt very privileged to be an integral part of this great adventure in the peace of the great Australian bush, without being caught up in the stressful bustle of a big city.

When communicating with any of the NASA colleagues in America, I always appreciated I was in a wild and natural bush setting while most of them were in the bowels of buildings buried among industrious, seething American cities.

But we also had our hazards getting to work – I remember driving to work for an afternoon shift and as we came around a corner we found a whole section of the road had slipped down the steep mountainside into the valley.

The first shift car just before us had crossed it safely, so it was only minutes, perhaps seconds, and our car could have dropped down into the valley with us on board. All the vehicles above the slip were trapped on the mountain until they were able to bulldoze an old track nearby, days later.

A hired bus from Canberra had to drive up to the wash-away to get the staff to work and back every day.

Sometimes enormous boulders, bigger than the cars, would roll down the mountainside after heavy rain, and one night at midnight we had to chop our way through a tree fallen across the road. The rain was a sheet of sparkling white streaks in the car's headlights as we chopped and dragged trunk and branches out of the way.

Another time I was driving home alone at 2 am when a kangaroo jumped out of the dark in an isolated part of the road, smashed the grill and radiator of the car, hopped off, and left me with a car with no cooling system. From the accident point, what normally took 20 minutes to get home, took six hours, trying to keep the engine cool in short runs.

Then came the sad day in March 1974, just a month after the last manned Skylab splashdown when we said farewell to the Manned Space Flight

Network, and began a new career as Deep Space Station 44, working with Deep Space Stations 42 and 43 at Tidbinbilla.

I can clearly remember the words of Chris Kraft, NASA's first Flight Director, and later Director of the Johnson Space Center, Houston, when we met at the opening of Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station in March 1967.

When I asked him how he saw the future he answered,

"You will be busy for many years – there will be lots of missions to the Moon, simulations, stations on the Moon, Earth orbiting spacecraft – there will be plenty of work for you."

He was confident there was work for us stretching away into the future – I felt very happy – I had a secure and exciting job for the rest of my life.

Seven years to the month he sent us his last teletype message, thanking us for our support. The job Honeysuckle Creek was designed and built for was over. There were no more Moon missions to come.

We were not needed any more.

We left the Manned Space Flight Network with a record of excellence as one of the best stations in the Network.

During the Deep Space period there was the excitement of the Viking mission to land a spacecraft on the surface of Mars where Honeysuckle Creek played an important role. We supported missions sending probes into the atmosphere of Venus, and the German Helios spacecraft studying the sun.

Then there were the quieter days as we sat and tracked the trailblazing space probes such as Pioneer 10 and 11, and Voyager 1 and 2 on their journeys through the solar system. Their excitement came with planetary encounters at Jupiter and Saturn.

I can remember sitting at the receiver/exciter console at Honeysuckle Creek and locking onto the signal from the Voyager spacecraft at Saturn, and four hours later our receivers locking up to the signal returned to us from Voyager. I had to try and imagine the scene of our tiny spacecraft approaching this gargantuan planet with its rings.

They never talked to us, these deep space probes, there were no real time pictures, not like the manned spacecraft we were used to. We never saw their pictures until they appeared days later in the media. The pictures they sent back were awesome though.

These four spacecraft are now pushing their way out into our Milky Way Galaxy, beyond the orbit of the planet Pluto, and at the turn of the century Voyager 1 was the farthest from Earth. Travelling at a speed of 62,700 kilometres per hour relative to the Sun, it was over 10.9 billion kilometres from the Earth, and the signals from the Earth-based tracking stations took over 20 hours to get to the spacecraft and back at the speed of light.

Sometime in the first few years of the 21st century the Voyagers are expected to cross the heliopause*, the outermost edge of the Sun's solar wind. Then they will be free of the Sun's influence and enter interstellar space to be tracked into the galactic void until either the fuel or electric power runs out, or their sensors lose the Sun and the signals from Earth.

After we lose their signals, the Pioneer and Voyager journeys will then go on forever, possibly still travelling somewhere in the galaxy when our sun has long burned itself out, and the human race has either moved elsewhere, or become extinct.

Honeysuckle Creek supported these trailblazers at the beginning of their odysseys – odysseys with no end.

[Editor's note: *Voyager 1 crossed the heliopause in August 2012, and Voyager 2 in November 2018. Current power conservation plans are expected to allow the Voyager's to still be sending their carrier signals into the early 2030s. Voyager 1 will reach 1 light day from Earth in November 2026.]





The entry to the Honeysuckle site in early 1992. The abandoned guardhouse and locked gate did little to deter vandals from damaging the buildings and infrastructure . Photo: Malcolm Brinkley

Back on Earth, time ran out for Honeysuckle Creek in 1981

The Deep Space Network had to respond to budget restrictions – this time there were no other networks to help out. I had the privilege of being a member of the team that conducted the last track, on 23 November 1981. The doors closed, the buildings fell silent. The antenna servos no longer whined into the night. Val Jefferies no longer delivered fuel to the bunkers and the Caterpillar diesels no longer throbbed away in the power house – all the lights went out. The clients of the best restaurant for kangaroos in the district were left to dine on the grass in peace.

At the end, as we sat in the operations room tracking the spacecraft, we planned golf courses, holiday centres, film studios – surely there was some use for the solid buildings? But nobody could find any use for them. Nobody wanted them. Too far away in the bush, but the antenna was still useful, and was moved to nearby Tidbinbilla, but the buildings were left to decay.

The next time Honeysuckle Creek made the newspapers, only the local ones now, they showed pictures and descriptions of the results of vandal attacks.

Then came the day I took some friends to show them Honeysuckle Creek.

The buildings were gone.

They were completely demolished in June 1992 when no use could be found for them, and were regarded as a hazard to visitors.

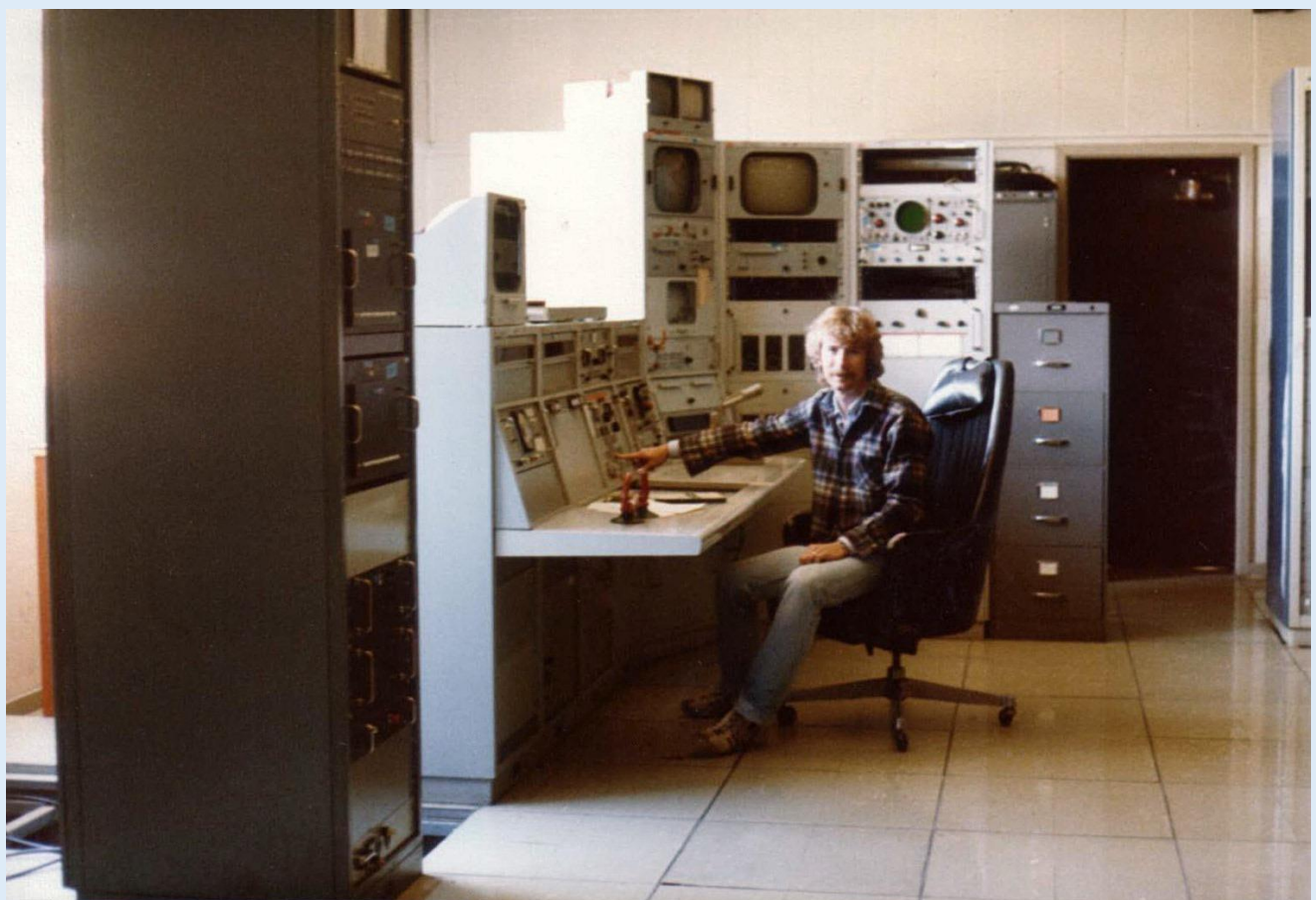
I also realised that gone were all the excited voices radiating to us from above the atmosphere, telling us about the unknown; the new experience of living in weightless space; the stupendous views of Earth from great distances away, just a blue ball suspended in the void; descriptions of another world, the wondrous though alien world of the Moon.

Those who follow already know what to expect. An exciting, never-to-be-repeated era had passed into history.



Above: The Honeysuckle Ops building as seen from the antenna pad.
The flags and microwave tower have gone. Photo: Scott Hendry, circa 1982

Below: Scott at the Servo console – with no antenna to control!
This was one of the few pieces of equipment left. It was later removed. Photo: Chris Hendry, circa 1982





Above: Scott Hendry inside the almost empty Ops area, circa 1982. Photo: Chris Hendry
Below: The Ops area after the vandals had been through, circa 1992. Photo: Malcolm Brinkley





A view of the original antenna pad as seen on 21 November 2012 during a visit to the Honeysuckle site.
Note the Moon can be seen between the trees at the centre of the photo (and in the inset).

Photo: Glen Nagle.



Above: The Honeysuckle site with the rusted metal and blue information panels. Photo: Darren Osborne.

Below: Hamish Lindsay walks across what remains of the main building's foundations. Photo: Canberra Times



Photo digitally cleaned using AI.



Hamish Lindsay leans against one of the heritage markers on the original antenna pad. Hamish was a member of the Technical Staff at Honeysuckle Creek from 1966 – 1981.

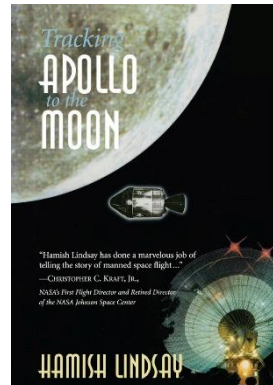
The stations and those glorious early days of the human race's greatest adventure now only exist in the minds of the people who were there, now scattered around the world. One by one those memories are being lost as the people pass on.

The Australian tracking stations at Island Lagoon and Red Lake (South Australia), Muchea and Carnarvon (Western Australia), Cooby Creek (Queensland), and Orroral Valley and Honeysuckle Creek (Australian Capital Territory) have all gone, now just patches of ground with special memories.

A few photographs and some official documentation are all that remains.

Thanks to the foresight of members of the local government, the Honeysuckle Creek site has been preserved, with steel panels displaying some of the station's activities and achievements.

There is a picnic area to encourage people to spend some time to enjoy the bush setting, and contemplate the part played by Honeysuckle Creek in the early days of space exploration.



I have written the book *Tracking Apollo to the Moon*, published by Springer Verlag in London, in the hope this book will keep alive for future generations the stories of the people and the tracking stations who helped support the American Moon Landing program and its quest for knowledge about our home planet, and our part in the human race's first steps into the alien environment of our solar system, and beyond to the Milky Way Galaxy.

— Hamish Lindsay

Essays by Hamish Lindsay 2012-2014

Content from the honeysucklecreek.net website created and developed by Colin Mackellar.

Unless specified, illustrations and captions by Hamish Lindsay, Colin Mackellar, and Glen Nagle. PDF formatted by Glen Nagle.

© www.honeysucklecreek.net 2026



The Honeysuckle Creek antenna in its current incarnation as Deep Space Station 46 (DSS-46), now stands 'retired' at the Canberra Deep Space Communication Complex at Tidbinbilla. After being moved from Honeysuckle in 1981 as DSS-44, it was reconfigured for ongoing Deep Space Network operations at Tidbinbilla from 1983 to 2010. Photo: Colin Mackellar.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hamish Lindsay (1937-2022) worked at the Muchae, Carnarvon and Honeysuckle Creek space tracking stations between 1963 and 1981.

He wrote many essays on the history of human spaceflight and was the author of the book, *Tracking Apollo to the Moon*.