

Blue Steel Trials South Australia 1957 – 1965

The BS 2001 Reunion Committee

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Our Web Site South Australian Blue Steel Trials 1958-1965 at <http://bluesteel.cjb.net>

Memories of Mirikata

The settlement of Mirikata, from an Aboriginal word, meaning 'morning star' became an occasional centre of operations for the members of the UKAEA/EMI team during Blue Steel flight trials in the early 1960s. The complex at this outpost, about 200 km north west of Woomera Range E, had been established during the late 1950s to provide tracking, instrumentation and monitoring facilities for vehicles launched along the range centre line. One of two FPS-16 'C' band radars – the other being at Red Lake near Woomera – was located at this site. These radars were later to play an important role in the Blue Streak and ELDO launchings of the late 1960s.

Mirikata provided accommodation for itinerant trials staff and had a nucleus of resident staff. The permanent residents included a number of self-imposed exiles whose individual backgrounds remained closely guarded secrets. Excellent food was provided in the mess and a bar was available for after work relaxation. Tennis courts and pool tables were available and films were shipped in by ASCO once a week for added entertainment. On film nights the population of the camp increased with the influx of families from surrounding pastoral properties, such as McDouall Peak, The Twins, Bon Bon, Mount Eba, Ingomar and Bulgunnia. It was not unusual for station families to make a return trip of 150 km to enjoy a film evening. Parents would arrive with their children, awake and in their pyjamas who, three hours later, would be carried back to their vehicles, out to the world, for the journey home. These were indeed significant social occasions and it is as well that booze buses and radar traps were rare in those days.

Mirikata had its own airfield enabling the rapid transit of supplies, provisions and people from Woomera. RAAF de Havilland Otter aircraft were mostly used with the occasional DC3 and on at least one occasion a Bristol Freighter. A helipad, close to the accommodation blocks, allowed access by RAAF helicopters which were occasionally used by staff designated to carry trial records back to civilization.

The designated impact area for Blue Steel rounds lay to the south west of Mirikata and a control centre for two telemetry stations in the impact area was established on a prominence at McDouall Peak which, at 210 metres above sea level, stood proud of the surrounding landscape and afforded excellent visual views and electromagnetic coverage of the surrounding area. McDouall Peak had been named after the explorer John McDouall Stuart who had traversed this area on his expedition in 1858 as a precursor to his eventual successful south-north crossing of the continent in 1862. Equipment installed atop the peak served the two purposes of monitoring and control. A high gain fixed dish antenna was pointed towards Woomera and enabled the performance of the BS payload to be monitored during the pre-launch approach. Combinations of aerial arrays, installed at the top of a 100ft mast were set up to receive telemetered data from BS during the final phase of its flight, prior to, and at impact.

South west of McDouall Peak was the designated impact area. Two stations, M19 and M20, about 4km apart, were located in the impact area. At each of M19 and M20 was a 150 ft mast at the top of which were installed multiple aerial arrays and masthead receivers which had to be adjusted to suit the parameters of each trial. (When we were recruited for this job and given our duty statements, they didn't tell us about the mast-climbing bit!). Telemetry receiving and recording equipment at each of these stations was set up for each launch after which the EMI people would

hastily retreat by Landrover to the comparative safe sanctuary of McDouall Peak from where the M19 and M20 equipment would be remotely controlled for the duration of the trial. (We had been told about the excellence of the Elliotts people and their inertial navigator but we were a sceptical lot!) We would watch from our vantage point on the Peak, binoculars trained, stopwatches at the ready, eager to plot the impact point before returning to M19 and M20 to retrieve photographic records of another successful trial. Then back to Salisbury for R & R and preparation for the next trial, whenever that might be.

If you were a designated courier for the trial records you were afforded very special treatment with guaranteed transport back to Salisbury, RAAF helicopter to Woomera and Ansett ANA to Adelaide - none of this wait-listed nonsense. Lesser mortals just took their place in the queue and if you missed your chance you were stuck at Mirikata for another weekend. If this happened you had the option of commandeering a Landrover and driving to Coober Pedy, 100km to the north, to chance your arm in the opal fields. If that did not appeal you could always avail yourself of the amenities of the Mirikata camp bar.

For three and a bit years life was different from that to which we had become accustomed in the Old Dart. Daily driving to the office no longer proved to be a task to elevate the blood pressure. On the other hand, a vehicle breakdown between home and office would mean an appreciably longer wait for road service. Memories fade with the passage of time and while names may not easily be recalled after 35 plus years some events remain vividly clear. A couple, from Mirikata circa 1963, spring to mind: One of the real characters on the station permanent staff, name forgotten but I'll call him Fred, had a colourful turn of phrase. Not only did he insert expletives between words but he regularly inserted them between the syllables of multi-syllabled words. On this particular occasion the Governor of South Australia, Lieutenant-General Sir Edric Bastyan and Lady Bastyan had flown into Mirikata with other dignitaries on a whistle-stop visit. We all assembled in the recreation hall where the cook had provided a sumptuous spread of delicacies and nibbles and freshly brewed tea in bone china cups which had never been seen before and were, to my knowledge, never seen again. The official party mingled with the assembled throng engaging in appropriate discussions. Mirikata hierarchy, being aware of Fred's conversational limitations, and not wishing to affront vice-regal sensitivities, had posted two guardians on Fred with instructions to keep him well out of range of the official party. The intricate and subtle manoeuvring was both effective and masterly as the groups circled the room, diametrically opposed. Same day, same function.

The Governor's party had arrived at Mirikata by air at about 1400 hours. A BS trial was imminent and the EMI team had flown in by Otter which had touched down just before the official group. Just time enough to change into working garb of shorts and desert boots and, in the interests of decency, shirts. Sir Edric, genuinely interested in the longevity of service of these people at such a remote location asked Ron Longland how long he'd been at Mirikata. Ron, glancing at his watch, replied without hesitation, "Twenty five minutes". Ron was always the perfectionist with a great sense of attention to detail. . . . and one from Roy Watts: Roy recalls a particular incident which remains indelibly fixed in his memory. He was travelling from Woomera to Mirikata with EMI team mates one morning as passenger in the RAAF de Havilland Otter and had successfully eased his way into the prized seat next to the pilot. Ten minutes into the flight the pilot turned a noticeable shade of green and complained of feeling unwell. Roy, Figure 17 Roger Stacey and Brian Whiting relax on the Otter flight to Mirikata oblivious of the drama in the cockpit. Figure 16 Hey Ho, hey ho it's off to work we go 25 with the bravado of a hero who had no other option, asked whether there was anything he could do to help, already regretting his eagerness to sit up front. The pilot, having quickly assessed the likely value of Roy's assistance and deciding against it, was able to make an emergency landing at

Mt. Eba Station where a detailed inspection of his jocks revealed the existence of a large and voracious redback spider which had been the source of the trouble. During all this time Roy's EMI colleagues dozed, oblivious of the drama being enacted in the cockpit. -----
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Mirikata Today. Blue Steel veterans have made a number of pilgrimages to this region during the last few years enjoying the hospitality of Wayne and Sharon Rankin at The Twins station. Wayne was one of the youngsters who attended the film nights at Mirikata in the early 1960s and he remembers some of the genuine characters of those days – and there were many.

The Mirikata camp is now desolate and has suffered the ravages of neglect and desecration but the spirit of excitement which we shared can still be sensed by those who return to the site of their earlier endeavours. The gardens between the accommodation blocks, once carefully tended by the resident manager have reverted to nature. Roofing material from most of the buildings has been removed by wind and scavenging visitors. There are still antennae on the roof of the 3-storey Instrumentation Building but access to them is made difficult by the condition of the stairways that remain.

McDouall Peak shows few signs of the activity which was evident in earlier days. A few foundations of earlier constructions remain and the shed which previously housed the generating plant on the peak is now housing the generators which service The Twins station. Otherwise it appears much as the John McDouall Stuart party must have found it in 1858. The aerial masts at M19 and M20 still stand as silent sentinels. They seem to sway rather more than they did when we daily scaled them with toolkits and AVOs in the 1960s, but I suspect that this observation is due to the deterioration of faculties with advancing age.

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