

I cannot say that our visit to the Woomera rocket range left happy memories. One reason was the constant anxiety about security by those who showed us round, the other was the despondent spirit pervading the whole range, which depressed all of us at the time. I wrote a long piece about Woomera, published under the title “Woomera’s Empty Space”. The title, not mine, was an excellent one and fully represented my feelings.

The range was conceived in 1946 as a joint British — Australian test ground for guided missiles, firing in a western direction over thousands of kilometers of desert. This direction does not benefit from the rotation of the Earth. Firing east, would directly point to Sydney, and no-one dared to suggest that. So, a few Blue Streak, Blue Steel, and Bloodhound rockets had been launched in the past, and by the time we came, an unmanned target craft, called ‘Jindivik’ soared across the cloudless skies. [See also Title 101]

I received the ultimate shock about Woomera’s final humiliation 34 years later when a BBC news item on 28 August 2000 informed the world that tear gas [CS see Title 159] and water cannons had been used at Woomera to quell the riots which had broken out there. The angry inhabitants had attacked the guards and damaged the buildings, and stern counter-measures had to be employed to restore order. With strong security fences around the empty housing estates, when rocket activities had finally ceased and the engineers and their families had regained more equitable employment away from a desert — Woomera must have appealed to the Australian Authorities as the ideal site to house the ever — increasing number of illegal immigrants from Asia.

We were glad to return to more civilised places like Adelaide and Melbourne. In Melbourne we met Sir Gustav Nossal, FAA FRS, the distinguished director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, well known for his advances in the field of immunology. I did not write about his work, which I considered already well known.

I was much more interested to get to know Dr Phil Law, the Australian Antarctic pioneer, whose books I had been reading for some time and who became a good personal friend during the following decades. A superb cook, his steaks are unforgettable. When I first met him on this visit, he was the Director of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition. [See also Title 51, Antarctic Catalyst]

He had just returned from the Antarctic, where on this latest expedition he had supervised the suitability tests developed by the Australian Army Psychological Unit for those working in the stressful conditions of the Antarctic. “Happy in the Antarctic” was the title given to my report by a subeditor.