

I well recall early 1963 when I was working in Leicester, England and I was asked if I was interested in going to a place called Tidbinbilla in Australia for three years. To make it a little more appealing, some time would be spent at JPL in California and Goldstone in the Mojave desert.

As I was about to get married in August 1963, the idea of spending three years in the other side of the world was not received with much enthusiasm but, after much thought and a hastily rescheduled marriage, my wife and I agreed to the move.

I flew out to Adelaide in July 1963 and joined the engineering team that was being formed to man what was known at the time as DSIF 42 Tidbinbilla. This was the beginning of an interesting decade for me that was shared more or less equally between Tidbinbilla and a sister station at Island Lagoon, Woomera. The 1960s was a period of great activity in space exploration as the USA set about recovering its pre-eminent position that the USSR had achieved.

After a short stay in Adelaide I relocated to California and spent about six months at JPL in Pasadena and another six months at Goldstone. This proved long enough for my wife to deliver a son in September 1964. As an engineer who had been involved in radar development in Leicester it was fascinating to become involved with the advanced technology used to communicate over lunar and interplanetary distances and to meet the engineers who had designed it.

Initially, Tidbinbilla supported the Mariner and Surveyor missions and then, in 1966, we were advised that we were to be involved in the Apollo Program. This required a major upgrade to the Station, a part of which involved the microwave, transmitter and receiver subsystems. I was asked to stay on beyond the original three years to oversee this work and my three years tour of duty became four and eventually six.

One of the most rewarding things I was to experience was to be involved with the Apollo 8 mission in December 1968 – what a brilliant technical achievement that was.

Sadly, at about this time I was asked to transfer to DSS 41 Island Lagoon. I was most reluctant to do this but the Company felt that I was more use to it at DSS 41 and, after much coercion, I agreed to the transfer and so my association with DSS 42 Tidbinbilla came to an end – and that was the beginning of a whole new story.

Tidbinbilla was a great place to work in during those early pioneering days. I had an incredibly capable team of engineers and technicians working for me – many of whom are sadly no longer with us.

On behalf of all of us, Happy Birthday DSS 42 Tidbinbilla.

John Heath

Tidbinbilla, Island Lagoon

