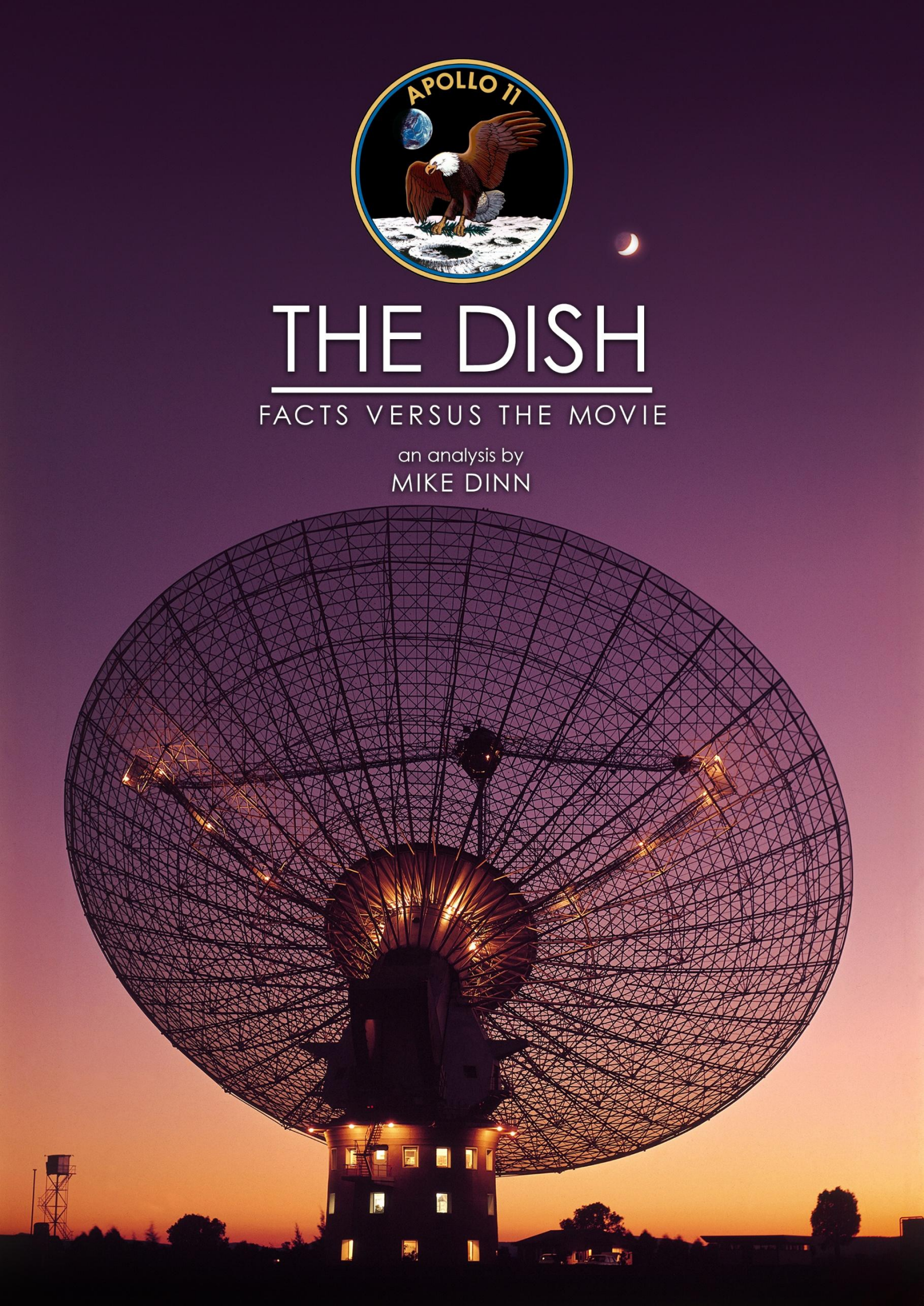


THE DISH

FACTS VERSUS THE MOVIE

an analysis by

MIKE DINN



“The movie is amusing and enjoyable, but is misleading...”

Mike Dinn, Deputy Station Director
Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station

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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:

Cover illustration: CSIRO photo of the Parkes radio telescope and the Moon in 1969.

Movie Facts

The Dish
Directed by Rob Sitch
Written by Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner,
Jane Kennedy, and Rob Sitch
Produced by Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner,
Michael Hirsh, Jane Kennedy, and Rob Sitch
Cinematography by Graeme Wood
Edited by Jill Bilcock
Music by Edmund Cho,
Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

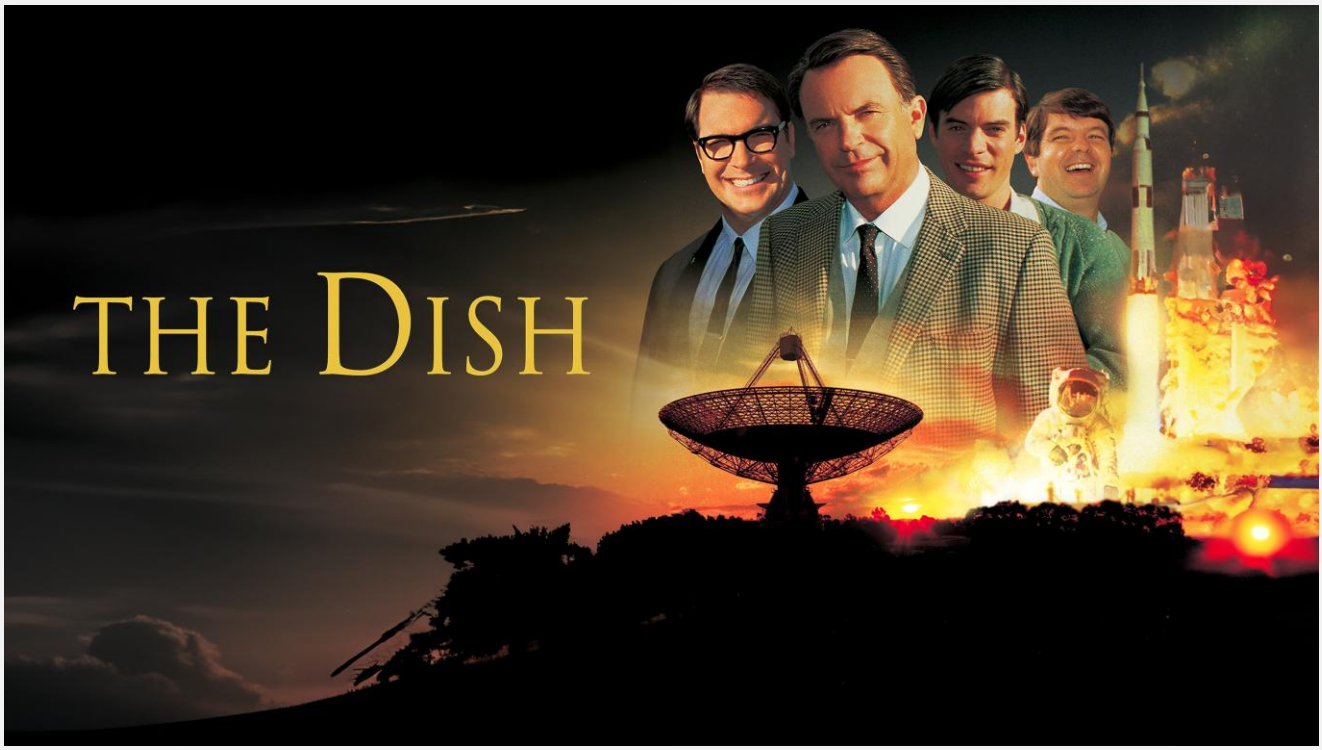
Production companies
Working Dog
Dish Film Productions
Summit Entertainment
Distant Horizon
Distributed by Roadshow Entertainment

Release dates
15 September 2000 (TIFF)
19 October 2000 (Australia)
Running time: 101 minutes

The Cast
Sam Neill as Cliff Buxton
Patrick Warburton as Al Burnett
Tom Long as Glenn Latham
Kevin Harrington as Ross 'Mitch' Mitchell
Roy Billing as Mayor Robert 'Bob' McIntyre
Eliza Szonert as Janine Kellerman
Tayler Kane as Rudi Kellerman
Billy Mitchell as Cameron
Roz Hammond as Miss Nolan
John McMartin as U.S. Ambassador
Christopher-Robin Street as Damien
Luke Keltie as Graeme
Naomi Wright as Melanie
Ben Wright-Smith as Nicholas
Beverley Dunn as Secretary voiceover
Grant Thompson as Mr. Callen
Bille Brown as the Prime Minister (IRL John Gorton)
Lenka Kripac as Marie McIntyre
Neil Pigot as John, the newspaper reporter
Frank Bennett as Barry Steele
Nicholas Bell as TV Scientist
Carl Snell as Billy McIntyre
Bud Tingwell as Reverend Loftus
Colette Mann as Betty the Bush Poet
Kerry Walker as Pearl
Bernard Curry as Newspaper Reporter
Denise Roberts as Bronwyn

Filming locations
Parkes radio telescope; Forbes; Old Parliament
House, Canberra; Crawford Productions, Box Hill, VIC.





Publicity banner for the Australian movie ‘The Dish’. Image: © Working Dog Productions

THE FACTS

THE TRUTH ABOUT ‘THE DISH’

The movie "The Dish", produced by Working Dog, was released in Australia in October 2000.

It had a limited release in the USA on 14 March 2001 and wider release on 27 April. The UK release occurred on 11 May 2001.

It was later released on DVD, and regularly plays on free-to-air and streaming TV services.

The movie is a comedy based on Australia's role in the Apollo 11 Mission in July 1969.

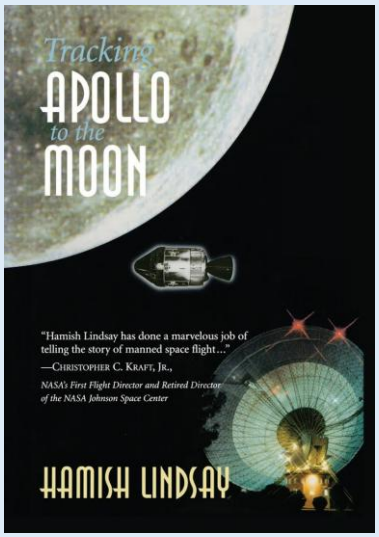
During Apollo 11, I was the Deputy Station Director at the Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station, responsible for Operations. My role was to co-ordinate the Canberra/Parkes tracking resources supporting the mission, including CSIRO's radio telescope. I therefore have firsthand knowledge of the mission and Australia's part and passed this experience on to "The Dish" producers.

The movie is certainly amusing and enjoyable, but on the facts, is misleading and wrong in many historical areas.

For storytelling purposes, the movie diminishes the role played at other station and by many, many people, including those at Parkes.

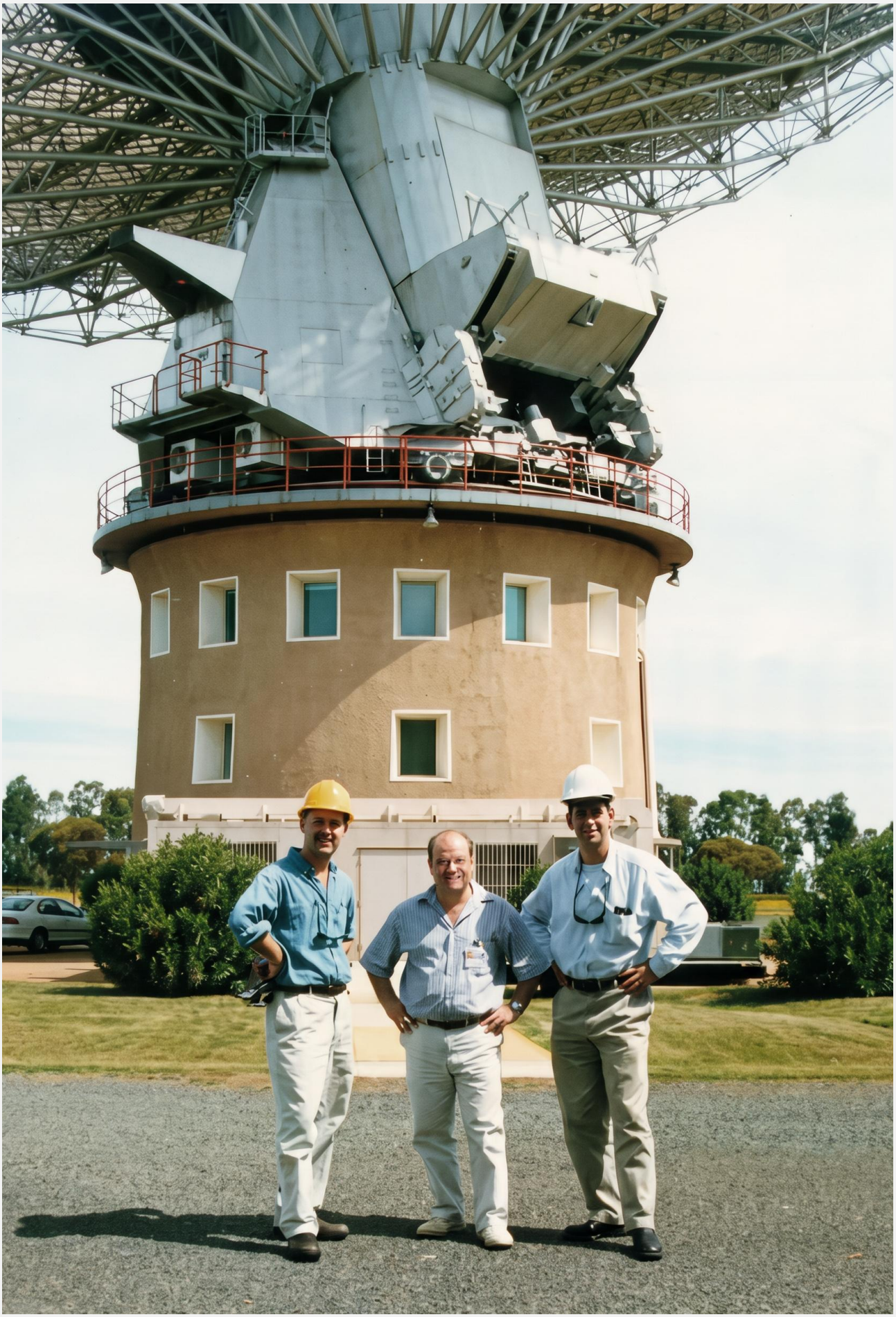
For the whole story, THE authoritative book on Apollo tracking by Hamish Lindsay - one of the Honeysuckle team – is “Tracking Apollo to the Moon”. It focuses on the Apollo manned missions, and Australia’s role, covering the history of all the early space programs and missions in 440 pages, with over 100 photos and illustrations.

Go look for it on Amazon, or your local bookstore. Click on the jacket image below for more details. Chris Kraft, Director at Johnson Space Center said, *"Hamish Lindsay has done a marvellous job of telling the story of manned flight ..."*



Tracking Apollo to the Moon
by Hamish Lindsay

Scan or click for link to Amazon shop.



From left: Santo Cilauro, John Sarkissian, and Rob Sitch at Parkes, 23 October 1998.
Image: CSIRO



Above: Honeysuckle Creek. Image: Hamish Lindsay

1. WHO WAS INVOVLED

The movie's narrative implies that Parkes was "THE" communication facility in Australia for Apollo 11. It certainly stated that Parkes was the 'only station in the Southern Hemisphere capable of receiving the TV'. There are a couple of passing references to Honeysuckle Creek which are easily missed unless you are listening for them.

The fact is that Honeysuckle Creek was THE Apollo communication facility in Australia for the lunar phases, being part of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center's Manned Space Flight Network (MSFN).

The other MSFN station in Australia was at Carnarvon, Western Australia. This facility had critical roles in the near-earth phases as well as the Lunar Experiments package. Parkes was, and is, a radio telescope - not a tracking station.

Honeysuckle was originally built, staffed, trained and operated for the Apollo program.

Minister's Press Release

Click or scan the QR code for the Minister of Supply's summary of the roles of the various organisations.

The station was managed by the Australian Department of Supply and contracted by 130 personnel. NASA/JPL's facility at nearby Tidbinbilla also had dedicated Apollo equipment and people, and was operated as an additional receive/transmit facility for the Apollo program. Honeysuckle's antenna was dismantled in 1983 and reassembled at Tidbinbilla, where it was in use until 2010.

Honeysuckle audio reference

Click or scan the QR code for an audio clip from the movie where they refer to the Honeysuckle Creek – 14kb mp3 - 9 secs.



David Cooke took this photo of ‘the dish’ at Parkes after the wind storm front had passed by.
Note: This image has been digitally sharpened from the original using AI tools and Photoshop.

“What's the bell for?” “Lets us know it's windy.” “I could've told you that. It's blowing a bloody gale.”

Radio telescopes like Murriyang can be buffeted by wind just like your umbrella on a windy day. These days the telescope is automatically ‘parked’ at winds of 35km/hr. On the day of the Moon walk it was gusting up to 100km/hr! The observatory’s then-Director, John G Bolton, made the decision to keep pointing into the wind. Luckily, it all turned out for the best! – from an article by CSIRO.

2. REDUNDANCY

Parkes’ large dish was nice to have but Honeysuckle received and provided good quality TV pictures as instanced by the actual ‘first step’ images seen around the world.

Parkes was there to provide diverse back-up in case of communication problems, such as the Lunar Module’s High Gain Antenna not working, or Honeysuckle's antenna or its receiver system having problems.

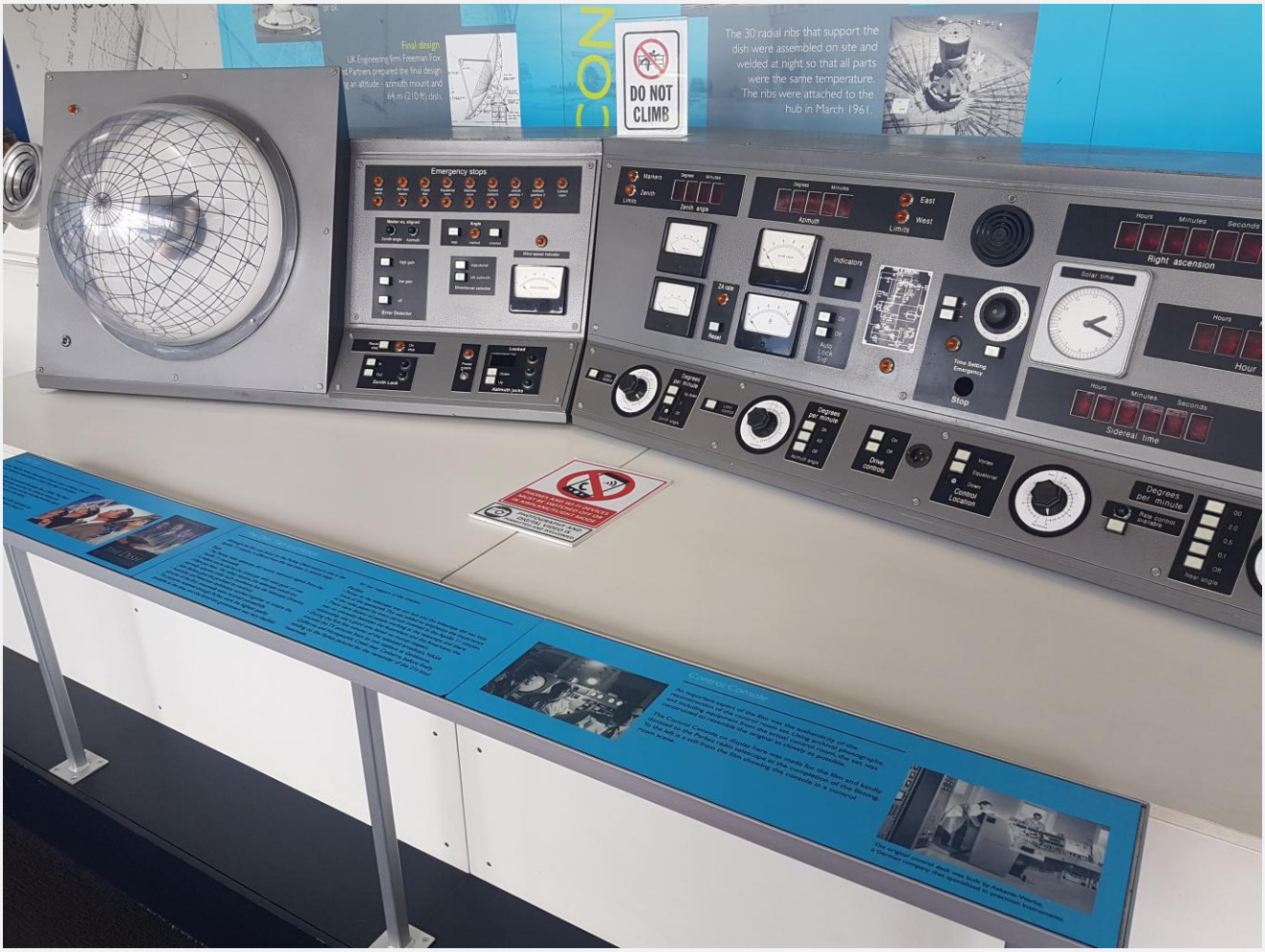
The Apollo program made maximum use of "redundancy" where possible. Fortunately, there were no such problems.

The better quality TV picture eventually used from Parkes’ 64-metre antenna was a bonus.

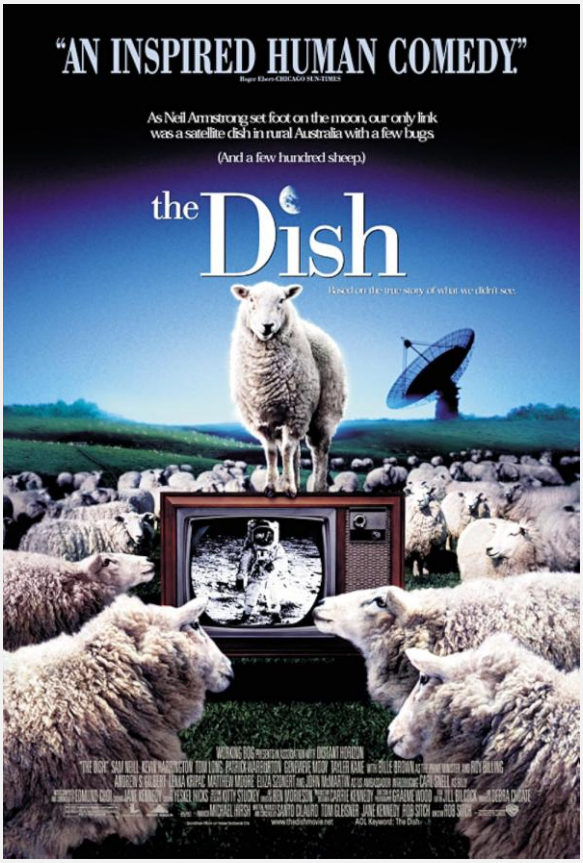
3. NO TRANSMITTER

In the movie you hear the dialogue saying, *"Parkes go for Command"*, which is wrong and misleading because Parkes has never had a transmitter and so was not capable of sending commands or voice to the spacecraft for either crewed or robotic missions.

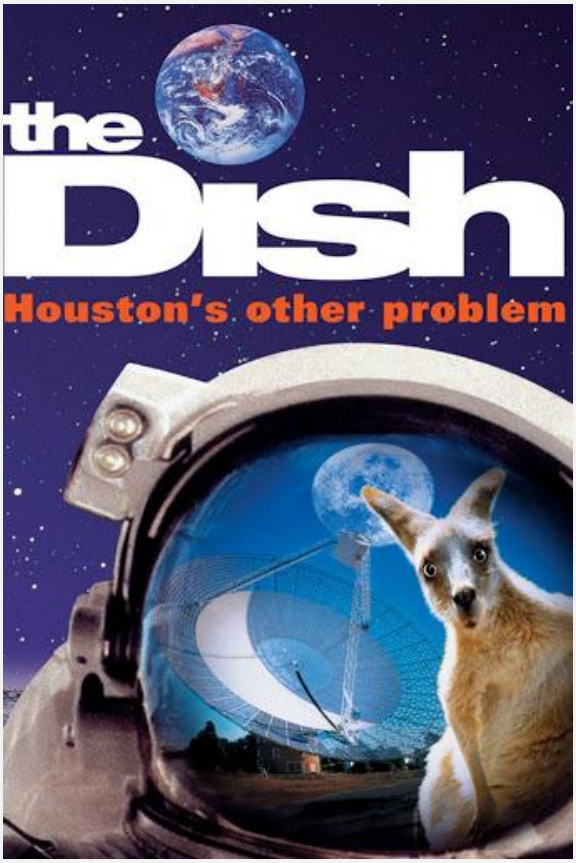
Scan Converter
Click or scan the QR code for some images from the scan converter seen at Honeysuckle.



The control console prop from the movie on display at the Parkes visitor centre.



The US publicity poster for the movie.



The DVD cover for the UK/Ireland release.



Parkes Director Dr. John Gatenby Bolton (right), with Roy Stewart (centre) and Dr. Paul Wild, head of CSIRO Radiophysics (left). In the background, at the radio telescope's controls, is Dennis Gill. Image: CSIRO

Roy Stewart was the Operations Supervisor heading the team of specialist NASA technicians at Parkes, and was the Engineer in Charge of SpaceTrack staff at Parkes for Apollo 12, 14, and 15 (at least).

This photo was taken during the Apollo 15 mission.

4. SPEAKING TO HOUSTON

All Apollo communications - voice and data and command - were processed within and via Honeysuckle, before or after going through one of the three antennas - Honeysuckle, Tidbinbilla, or the Parkes radio telescope.

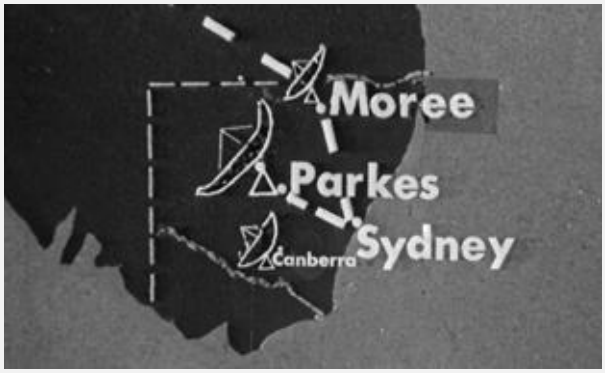
The only exception was Parkes' TV which was sent directly to Sydney Video at OTC Paddington, where it was processed and selected.

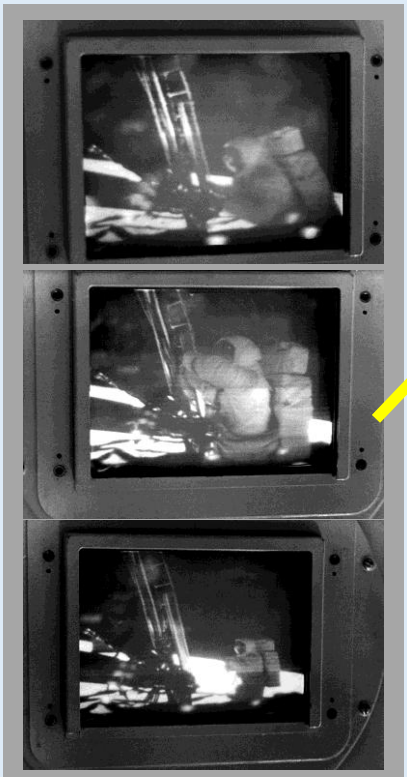
Therefore, all co-ordination between Houston and Australia was via Honeysuckle Creek, except for Parkes' television signal.

So, Parkes did not speak directly to Houston, all communications were through Honeysuckle.

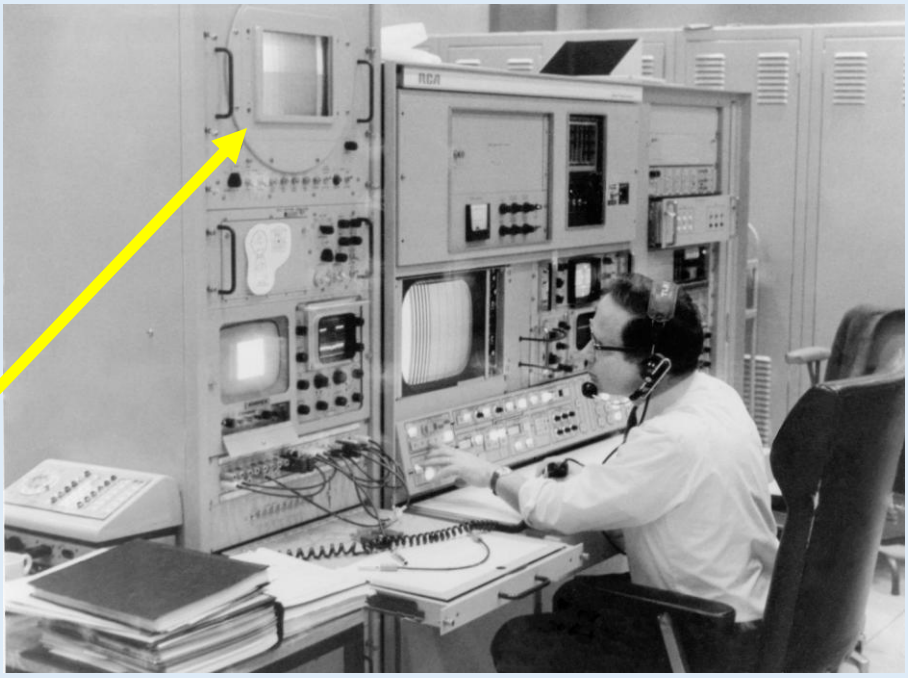
5. TRACKING

Parkes is shown as a vital part of communications during Earth orbit and translunar coast. It could not track Earth orbit, and lunar coast tracking was for test and training only. It had no mission role.





Ed's 35mm photos of the slow scan monitor (arrowed).



Ed von Renouard – aka "Video Von" at the video console at Honeysuckle.

ABC Radio report – transcript. Also see the link to the audio file below.

Armstrong's voice: *"Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed."*

ABC reporter: *"The worldwide television cover(age) of the Moon walk came from Australian tracking stations. The first picture came from Honeysuckle Creek near Canberra, and then after a few minutes, the giant radio telescope at Parkes in northwestern New South Wales took over."*

6. FIRST TV

The movie depicts that the first TV to Australia and the world came through Parkes by using an "offset feed" to compensate for the Moon being too low in their local skies.

While that may have been tried, the signal received was not sufficient to get a good image.

I had written to Parkes' astronomer Ron Ekers and Parkes' founding Director John Bolton (the real "Dishmaster" for Apollo 11) to confirm the sequence of events as was noted in logs at Honeysuckle at the time, and both agreed that my information was correct.

In the movie, what was shown was the initial upsidedown and highly contrasted TV images coming through Goldstone and then a better picture when Houston switched to Honeysuckle.

The TV images of Neil's first step used in the movie, were those from Honeysuckle Creek.

HSK Event Log • Letter to Parkes • ABC Report • Comms Transcript

Click or scan the QR code.

Honeysuckle Creek event log – 4.5 mb PDF	Mike Dinn's letter to Ron Ekers – 4.9mb PDF	ABC radio news report on Australia's role. 39.4kb mp3 - 20 secs	Transcript of comms between Honeysuckle and Houston.



At Sydney Video - Charlie Goodman (left) was responsible for selecting the video from either Honeysuckle Creek or Parkes to send via satellite to Houston. Elmer Fredd (centre with can in hand), on the right is Dept. of Supply engineer Peter Trost. Thanks to Dick Nafzger. Scan: Bill Wood.

7. NASA'S MESSAGE

After the moon walk segment in the movie, there was a scene quoting the message from Apollo 11's Flight Director Cliff Charlesworth congratulating Parkes. The actual message received was sent to Honeysuckle for "Parkes (via HSK)" and congratulated *"Honeysuckle Creek and Tidbinbilla and the CSIRO Personnel at the Parkes 210' "*.

Maybe a separate message to Parkes exists, but I've never seen it. The filmmakers were aware of the real message, as I'd read it out at the 1999, 30th anniversary of Apollo 11 at Parkes.

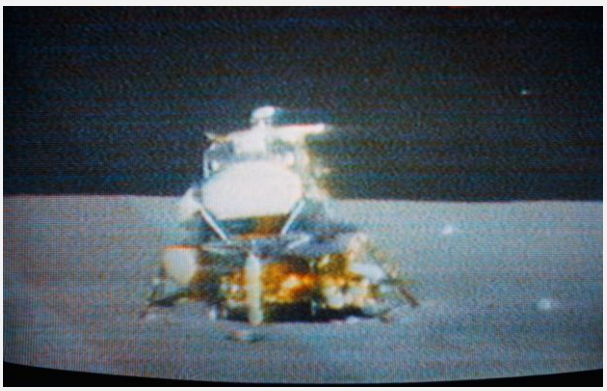
It is a shame that the movie couldn't use the full message to acknowledge each station's role.

Charlesworth's Message

Click or scan the QR code for the complete original message of congratulations.

8. LIFT-OFF

The LM lift-off TV shown was not from Apollo 11 but was most likely from Apollo 15.



Apollo 15 LM 'Falcon' about to lift-off.

9. LOSS OF SIGNAL

The portrayal of the loss of the spacecraft data after the "power failure" might have been good for comedy but bore no resemblance to the professionalism needed and demonstrated by all parties, including Parkes, in real life. No one would have risked the astronaut's lives like that or tried to *"bullsh*t"* NASA.



The Operations Console – June 1969
The Operations and Management team at Honeysuckle Creek preparing for Apollo 11.
From back: John Saxon, Ken Lee, Tom Reid (Station Director),
Mike Dinn (talking to Parkes) and Ian Grant.

10. NASA PERSONNEL

The movie portrays NASA's involvement at Parkes through actor Partrick Warburton's role as the anxious but competent, Al Burnett.

Australian staff prided themselves on not needing NASA personnel to help them do their job. There were none at Honeysuckle during Apollo 11.

In fact, it was well acknowledged that we knew at least as much about how to manage, maintain and operate the stations' communications and tracking role, as any our US colleagues.

It is true that there were some US engineers from the Goddard Space Flight Center at Parkes during Apollo 11 but support for subsequent missions at Parkes came from Tidbinbilla personnel.

So, the portrayal of the need for any NASA expertise or oversight was slightly misleading.

11. THE PRIME MINISTER

Lastly, the then Prime Minister – Sir John Gorton visited Honeysuckle Creek, not Parkes, on the day of the Moon landing (21 July).

John Gorton's Visit

Prime Minister, Sir John Gorton unexpectedly arrived at Honeysuckle Creek on the morning of the Apollo 11 Moon walk – 21 July 1969.
Click or scan the QR code for images from the visit



From left: Tom Long, Patrick Warburton, Sam Neill, and Kevin Harrington. Image: Working Dog Productions

SUMMARY

BASED 'LOOSELY' ON A TRUE STORY

In summary, I'm aware that the movie is described as "based" on a true event. But the actual historic events could have been portrayed without any real loss to the film's narrative.

I obviously appreciate that accuracy bending was necessary to make a movie, portraying scenes appropriate for dramatic and comedy reasons.

Since the film was released, the public and media have ended up with the misconception that Parkes received the TV of Armstrong's first steps on the Moon and transmitted them to the world.

I know this has been upsetting to many of the veterans who worked at Honeysuckle, Tidbinbilla, Carnarvon and elsewhere – including Parkes.

Most of the errors could have been corrected or mitigated without detracting from the movie.

In the end though, yes, I feel that 'The Dish' is an entertaining movie, it's just not a documentary.

However, it did remind Australians that our nation was involved in one of the greatest adventures of all time – and maybe they're interested enough to learn more about our role – the true story.

More analysis on the actual events

Click, tap or scan the QR codes.

John Sarkissian's 'On Eagle's Wings'

CSIRO's 'The Dish – Fact vs Fiction'

(Most of) the Honeysuckle Creek post-Apollo-11 team



1. Tom Reid
2. Mike Dinn
3. Martin Geasley
4. Dianne McMinn
5. Ken Lee
6. Frank Campbell
7. Mike Evenett
8. Laurie Turner
9. Bill Kempees
10. Bruce Hamilton
11. Gillian Morris
12. Alan Foster
13. Tony Cobden
14. Graham Fraser
15. Len Litherland
16. George Hardy
17. Ernie Cummins
18. Rod Lindrea
19. Paddy Sheehy
20. Ian Smith
21. Brenda Scott
22. Roy Belchambers
23. Dini Quaedvlieg
24. Shaun McGrail
25. Trevor Conyard
26. Don Gillespie
27. Peter Kent
28. Diane Gallea
29. Paul Hutchinson
30. Bill Perrin
31. Peter Cohn
32. Eric Stallard
33. Les Hughes
34. John Mitchell
35. Mike Linney
36. Dave Ralph
37. Dick Bamford
38. Nevil Eyre
39. Paul Mullen
40. Tom Wilson
41. Wally Smallwood
42. Eric Gadd
43. Bernard Smith
44. Jim Kirkpatrick
45. Horrie Clissold
46. Betty Clissold
47. Ted Burt
48. Lisa Jensen
49. Judy Wise
50. Leonie Hoorweg
51. Bill Shaw
52. John Vanderkly
53. Don Loughhead
54. Bill Waugh
55. Barry Curry
56. Bryan Sullivan
57. Frank Hain
58. Geoff Seymour
59. Ken Sheridan
60. Keith Hiscock
61. Terry Lloyd
62. Ron Chivers
63. Henry Gilkens
64. Bob Blunt
65. Ed von Renouard
66. John McLeod
67. Bob Long
68. Brian Bell
69. Jim Hanlon
70. Jerry Bissicks
71. Tony Van der Putten
72. Ian Mackay
73. Col Cochran
74. Kevin Gallegos
75. Paula Denning
76. Tony Salvage
77. Bob Dawes
78. Jeff Day
79. Jim (Dutchy) Holland
80. Ross Barnes
81. Col Power
82. Kevin Crabbe
83. Fred Hill Sr.

Most (but not all) of the Honeysuckle team for Apollo 11 – photo taken soon after the mission.

Not in photo: Hamish Lindsay (behind the camera!), John Saxon, Ian Grant, Andrew Tupalski, Tony Gerada, Vic Burman, and many others (we'll add those names when possible).

With thanks to John Saxon, Mike Dinn, Bryan Sullivan, Ken Sheridan, Martin Geasley, Paula Denning, Tony Gerada, Ian Mackay, Lance Peters, Trish Young and others.

Photo: Hamish Lindsay. Scan of 4x5 inch negative, image processing and key: Colin Mackellar, April 2026. honeysucklecreek.net

v. 2.3



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mike Dinn (b.1933 -) worked at the Honeysuckle Creek and Tidbinbilla space tracking stations between 1966 and 1994.

He played a leading role in the early days of space exploration through missions such as Surveyor, Apollo, Voyager and more.