INTRODUCTION

When US President Barack Obama visited Australia in 2011, he and Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a new era of military cooperation between the United States and Australia. In a much-anticipated speech to the Australian Parliament, Obama justly celebrated the deep history of friendship and shared values that had underpinned the sixty-year ANZUS alliance. But his principal focus was the future. In signalling the USA's pivot away from the Middle East and towards Asia, Obama was acknowledging the new rising centre of global power and affirming that the United States would seek to lead the region rather than be displaced from it. As an old and trusted ally, Australia would play a special role in advancing US priorities in Asia – Australia would be, in effect, the pivot of the USA's pivot. Among other things, there would now be a permanent rotation of US Marines through Darwin, and consequently a heightened US military presence on Australian territory. This centrepiece announcement made Obama’s visit to Australia the most consequential undertaken by a US president in decades.

While the Darwin announcement enjoyed broad support in Australia, some expressed doubts about the possible social consequences of an expanded US military presence on home soil. In the animated public debate that followed, the long history of US military involvement in Australia was often mentioned, but rarely
was its full significance assessed. As historians with connections to Western Australia, we were particularly struck by the absence of discussion about the first US defence facility established in Australia in peacetime – the US Naval Communication Station at North West Cape in Western Australia in 1963. Preceding the establishment of the heavily debated ‘Pine Gap’ satellite tracking station near Alice Springs by three years, North West Cape was viewed during the 1960s and 1970s as ‘one of the most important links in the US global defence network’.

In the context of the USA’s Cold War struggle against communism, its primary function was to maintain reliable communications by very low frequency (VLF) underwater transmission to submarines of the US fleet serving in the Indian and Western Pacific oceans – in particular, nuclear missile submarines, the US Navy’s most powerful deterrent force.

Yet North West Cape’s significance extended well beyond its strategic and operational value to the United States. The base had far-reaching consequences for domestic Australian politics, and an undeniable impact on the social landscape of Western Australia: the sole original purpose for building the new town of Exmouth was to provide support to the base through the provision of housing for its local workforce and dependent families of US Navy (USN) personnel. An integrated community of Australians and Americans, its twenty-five-year lease, signed between the two national governments in 1963, was intended to validate harmonious relations between the two countries – and to ensure lasting US involvement in the security of the north-west of Australia.

The establishment and evolution of the North West Cape project provides an important insight into the realities of Cold War foreign policy at the local level, the complex interplay between different levels of Australian government, the impact of uniquely
Western Australian conditions on the growth of the base and, significantly, the evolution of public perceptions of the presence of US military personnel in Australia since the 1960s.

In marked contrast to the hyper-awareness surrounding President Obama’s Darwin announcement in 2011, the US Naval Communication Station and the satellite township of Exmouth grew somewhat unobtrusively from the scrub of the mid-north-west of Western Australia. When, on 8 September 1960, Minister for Defence Athol Townley made the first official announcement to the Australian Parliament about the prospective establishment of the base, there was no lofty speech, no piercing debate about an American military presence in Australia, and no uproar from detractors. Indeed, during the first three years of its construction, there was only minimal commentary about the significance of such a base taking shape in Australia. In 1961, when a couple of Americans arrived at North West Cape out of the blue, asking to hire a small boat at the Exmouth Gulf sheep station, their presence provoked little curiosity. It was only much later that the local pastoralist realised that the Americans had been USN personnel on a reconnaissance mission.

The relative calm surrounding the genesis of the base should come as no surprise. Few people were privy to details about its construction, and those who did have access to this information overwhelmingly welcomed the prospect of its establishment. After expediently embracing the United States as a great and powerful friend in World War II, Australia addressed its strategic concerns in Asia through the ANZUS security treaty between the two countries and New Zealand. When *The West Australian* newspaper announced in 1961 that ‘the construction of a giant radio station by the United States navy’ was of ‘far-reaching importance in free world security’, it was reflecting general support for an American
presence vital to both US strategic programs and operations and the security of the north-west of Australia.

Party politics, however, disrupted consensus before the Menzies government presented the bill to approve the communication station to the Australian Parliament on 6 March 1963. ‘Faceless men’ became a permanent weapon in the arsenal of Australian political invective after the parliamentary leader and deputy leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) were forced to wait outside a party conference while delegates decided whether the bill should be supported. Although the decision narrowly favoured approval of the venture, ALP leaders in opposition and eventually in government always had to contend with a left-wing element critical of American facilities on Australian soil.

Looming in the background of the ideological rift between the major parties and within the ALP was the recent Cuban Missile Crisis and the expulsion of a Soviet diplomat suspected of attempting to break through the security curtain surrounding the Woomera rocket range in South Australia. As Cold War tensions persisted, fears increased that North West Cape would be ‘another obvious target for Russian espionage activity’ or even nuclear attack.3 But as American engineers and surveyors stepped off planes into the searing Australian heat to prepare for the erection of the massive transmitter of VLF messages – the 387-metre Tower Zero – and its twelve support towers on the red dirt of North West Cape, a vastly different reality overshadowed security considerations: isolation was to be as great a challenge as the high-level diplomatic and strategic ingredients of Cold War foreign policy – and not only to the Americans.

In 1942 Western Australians, trembling in the isolation of neglect by the eastern states, had greeted the suddenly arriving US forces as heroic saviours, even though the Americans were in
flight from the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies. Throughout World War II the predominantly US naval personnel of submariners and pilots had remained largely free from the controversies that surrounded their compatriots in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. The vast majority remained in Perth, enjoying a hospitality heaped on them by Western Australians just as likely to be intimidated by an alien climate and landscape few had visited 1,287 kilometres (800 miles) to the north.4

Little had changed a generation later. Soviet nuclear weapons may have been at the forefront of American political consciousness, but sandflies, destructive cyclones and a workforce assaulted by illness and disrupted by industrial unrest were oftentimes the more immediate anxieties of people of both nationalities at the Cape. On the one hand were the sailors of the USN, some with wives and children living in the town, others on an increasingly well-resourced accommodation base. On the other hand was a non-American workforce, transient in the early years, more settled as construction gave way to operation of the communication station. All of these people, whether assigned to the area by the USN or lured by high wages, were far less concerned with Cold War strategy than enjoying their day-to-day lives and improving their long-term prospects.

In the early days of construction, Western Australian newspapers referred to North West Cape as the frontier, drawing on a potent American historical myth, and indeed many people were seduced by the opportunity for adventure offered by the base situated in the ‘Wild West’ of Australia. American military personnel with postings at the Cape reported being ‘excited by the last frontier image and the youthfulness of Australia’.5 The high wages offered during the construction phase of the project were also ‘acting like a magnet to job-seekers’ from the east coast of
A Little America in Western Australia

Australia and from Perth, and from much more unusual sources. There were Native American Mohawks transferring fearless skills acquired on American skyscrapers to the erection of the Cape’s great towers. Many tradesmen and labourers were from European backgrounds unfamiliar to most Australians until the postwar revolution in immigration policy.

The diversity of this population, however, presented complex social challenges to a project theoretically committed to creating an Australian-American community at Exmouth. A successfully integrated township was seen as being of fundamental importance to the nation’s security concerns. Integration was pursued through a suite of calculated efforts to foster community spirit: American-style unfenced yards and the two nations’ flags flying side by side on American Independence Day and other festive occasions suggested unity in what some commentators called ‘a little America’. Yet among many tradesmen and labourers from European backgrounds were Serbs and Croats with ancient antipathies barely concealed by the Yugoslav label. In an era in which the civil rights movement of the early 1960s gave way to ghetto violence and political radicalism, the ‘American’ label also papered over potential conflicts within the USN, where African Americans accounted for roughly 10 per cent of the personnel and Filipinos and others were predominantly Spanish-speaking. In the 1970s the social fabric of the North West Cape community was further transformed as the USN responded to a ‘second wave’ of feminism, sending a contingent of WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) to work at the communication station for the first time.

Even more threatening to the goal of integration than racial, ethnic and gender differences were the details of the agreement between the Australian and US governments. The North West
Cape base was unique among global American defence facilities in the way its married personnel lived in a specially created town. International goodwill reached its peak in August 1968, one year after the official opening of the communication station, when it was renamed for Australia’s dramatically lost prime minister, Harold Holt. But fine speeches on such occasions did not mean the United States would ever set aside its habitual insistence on duty-free and other exclusive privileges in retail and recreational facilities for single sailors living on the base and USN families living, but not usually shopping, in the town.

As civil commissioner responsible for local government, Colonel Ken Murdoch – who also represented both the state and Commonwealth – fought an endless battle against American self-sufficiency. But the pursuit of the integrationist ideal was not the only problem forced on him by the Australian government’s determination to embed the United States into the core of Australia’s national security. Indifferent to the national government’s foreign policy agenda, the Western Australian government was unwilling and unable to support the construction of a new town offering no returns comparable to the promise of recently discovered mineral resources. As cost estimates for the development of Exmouth soared, the division between the Commonwealth and Western Australian governments widened, making financial issues a recurring problem for a local government without access to an independent revenue stream and administered by a civil commissioner representing both state and federal governments. Murdoch’s twelve-year tenure involved endless, largely fruitless jousting with Western Australia’s Minister for Development, and eventual premier, Charles Court.

By the time Murdoch retired in 1975, changes in both the national and international political climate were intruding on
the North West Cape project. An ALP government elected in 1972 insisted on joint control by the USN and Royal Australian Navy (RAN). In 1974 negotiations conducted in the shadow of the Watergate scandal by Deputy Prime Minister Lance Barnard led to thirty-five Australian service personnel occupying key supervisory positions in all operational aspects of the station, with another fourteen manning an exclusive Australian communications room and others in charge of security. A senior RAN officer was second-in-command of the station. American land at the Cape was reduced from an area the size of the city of Perth to a single communications building. And ‘US’ disappeared from the new title ‘Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt’.

That same year, moreover, the Vietnam War broke through the shield of isolation that had protected the Cape from international crises. A ‘Long March’ of protesters decrying US imperialism crossed the continent to the threshold of the communication station. Their demands that the ‘Yanks go home’ failed in the face of tight security and hostility from Exmouth residents. But it was clear that a turning point had been reached, connecting the base and its support community with an increasingly divisive international debate about Vietnam. The North West Cape project was no longer a unique experiment ‘at the ends of the earth’ but a monument to American power and Australian governments’ anxiety to secure a strategic friendship they deemed vital but that was increasingly being brought into question.

The most substantial book focused solely on the North West Cape venture, Brian Humphreys’ *Calls to the Deep: The Story of Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt, Exmouth, Western Australia*, is a detailed study of the technical aspects of VLF communications. Although Humphreys makes some references to construction
Introduction

milestones and a few to individuals, including a single one to an unnamed ‘civil commissioner’, his purpose was totally different from our intentions in this book. The same is true of work by foreign policy and defence analysts that has informed our understanding of the significance of the North West Cape base in the evolving relationship between Australia and the United States. The publications of Desmond Ball are especially authoritative sources about the wider context of American installations in many parts of Australia. Because he is basically hostile to the presence of the United States in Australia, Ball’s work has influenced more overtly polemical anti-American and anti-nuclear writings, some of which we have also consulted. Yet none of these publications is concerned with one of the major themes of A Little America in Western Australia: the experiences and attitudes of people of many backgrounds, positions and functions at Exmouth and North West Cape.

In filling a major gap in the history of North West Cape and Exmouth, we have drawn on a wide variety of previously unused sources. Intensive archival research has explored political relationships at all levels, the interplay of personalities such as Murdoch and Court and the oversight of the developing Cape project by government departments and security services. Those archival sources are so important that their unavailability after the early 1980s - due to the mandatory thirty year delay on access to government records - means that our detailed attention is focused on the 1960s and 1970s, with the later period to the end of the Cold War and the departure of the USN covered in a general overview. Yet although we give due attention to state, national and international politics in those two formative decades, we focus strongly on the lived experiences of service personnel and civilian residents. The voluminous reports and correspondence of
Civil Commissioner Murdoch are an especially important social, as well as political history, resource. Local newspapers – such as *The West Australian*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Daily News* – and the base newspaper, *The Talking Stick*, present a compelling contemporary portrait of life at the Cape. Most important of all are the recollections – recorded in interviews or communicated by letters and emails – of those who have generously shared their experiences, some forty years ago, at North West Cape⁹. This book tells their stories, so integral to the creation of the base and town, for the first time.

**Notes**

9. Quotations from interviews and from letters and emails received through personal correspondence will not be footnoted. Interviewees and correspondents are listed in the Bibliography.
Chapter One

POLITICS, PLANS AND PREPARATIONS FOR A UNIQUE EXPERIMENT

On 14 August 1967 a letter from Colonel Ken Murdoch, civil commissioner of Western Australia’s newest community, Exmouth, prompted a hurried search for an ‘aboriginal message stick’ to be used at the official opening of the town and the commissioning of the adjacent United States communications station. There was obvious symbolism in using a traditional Aboriginal device to mark the opening of the world’s most technologically advanced installation. But the manner of the approach said something more about the contemporary gulf between Indigenous and modern worlds. The letter was addressed to F. E. Gare, ‘Commissioner of Native Welfare’, used the lower-case ‘aboriginal’ and prompted a month-long search for the appropriate article. The carved message stick finally reached Murdoch on 11 September. When it was presented at the opening ceremonies five days later to Admiral Roy L. Johnson, commander-in-chief of the United States Pacific Fleet, there was no twenty-first-century-style ‘welcome to country’ acknowledgement of traditional owners of the land, nor were any to be seen in the vicinity of the township or the newly commissioned and named communications station, NAVCOMMSTA N. W. Cape.¹

The difference between 1960s attitudes and those half a century later is worth stressing because the development of the North West Cape project overlapped with that of another
American base – in the middle, rather than on the shores, of the Indian Ocean. American anthropologist David Vine has explained how three governments colluded in the forcible removal of the entire population of Diego Garcia and associated dependencies in the Chagos Archipelago. In return for its own independence, Mauritius relinquished the archipelago in 1965 to a new British Indian Ocean Territory. Britain then surrendered control – though not formal sovereignty – to the United States, while the Islanders were transferred into poverty in Mauritius and the Seychelles. Vine argues that these unsavoury transactions were carried out without proper democratic scrutiny in either Britain or the United States. The result was the gradual transformation of Diego Garcia into the United States’ ‘single most important military facility, with sufficient air and sea power to control half of Africa and the southern side of Asia and Eurasia’.2

In the early 1960s that ascendancy was far from assured. The youthful appearance and inspiring words of President John F. Kennedy raised hopes that the 1960s would rescue the United States from the multiple setbacks of the 1950s: the emergence of the Soviet Union as a nuclear rival, ‘loss of China’ to communism, and stalemate in the Korean War. Yet the rhetoric of his inaugural address in January 1961 was as devoid of substance as his pledge in May to place an American on the moon within the decade.

While Diego Garcia eventually would become a vital cog in the American war machine’s deployment of conventional weapons, especially during the Gulf wars in the 1990s and 2000s, the station at North West Cape was seen much sooner as a crucial ingredient of US power during the Cold War, through its provision of reliable communication with the submarines equipped with nuclear missiles – Polaris from 1960, and later their Poseidon successors. Establishment of the station required the same combination of
isolation from local hostility and political acquiescence – in this case by state and federal Australian governments – that made the build-up of Diego Garcia possible. The major difference was that both of those factors operated in Australia without the need for subterfuge or violence. Although Des Ball is correct in writing that negotiations between the two countries took place in secret for some time, their completion in 1963 brought some of the most famous exchanges in Australian parliamentary history: thereafter neither the communication station itself nor its purpose at North West Cape was ever secret.³

The building of facilities for the transmission of underwater messages obviously required proximity to the ocean and remoteness from radio interference amid the heavily populated cities of eastern Australia. Among the available extensive stretches of the Western Australian coastline there were historical as well as geographical reasons why Americans might focus on North West Cape. During the early stages of World War II the headlong retreat of US forces from the Pacific in 1942 ended with the establishment of its major submarine base at Fremantle, the port serving the Western Australian capital, Perth. Counterattacks against the Japanese required refuelling facilities for submarines, which were duly established, along with a rudimentary base for their crews, near the mouth of Exmouth Gulf on the eastern side of the long peninsula that ends at North West Cape. To defend the base, code-named Potshot, an airstrip for fighter planes was constructed at Learmonth, some 50 kilometres (35 miles) south of Vlamingh Head, the most northerly point of the peninsula.⁴

There was no need for the kind of brutal removal that disfigured American actions in Diego Garcia in their pursuit of a new policy of creating bases immune from potential agitation from a local population. Apart from the graziers and their employees
at the two pastoral stations, Exmouth Gulf and Yardie Creek, which were to cede land for the American base and the support town, the local population at North West Cape itself comprised a head lighthouse keeper, his wife, and three assistants at Vlamingh Head. Further south at Learmonth there were two caretakers at the airstrip and just the beginning of a small seasonal population at a newly established prawn-processing factory and at an experimental (and soon unsuccessful) seed pearling venture in the gulf.5

As the 1960s unfolded, the absence of an Indigenous population led to a widely promoted story of a devastating nineteenth-century ‘tidal wave’ obliterating much of the Aboriginal population and making the Cape area taboo to its survivors. The naming of a recreational park, Tallanjee Oval, in the new township of Exmouth, acknowledged an earlier Aboriginal presence. ‘Tallanjee’ was even included in 1962 in a list of five potential names for the town before ‘Exmouth’ was officially adopted.6 But there is no anthropological support for the notion of a natural disaster, despite the way twentieth-century cyclones gave it some plausibility. As they had on the cattle stations of the Kimberley to the north and in the sheep-raising hinterland of Shark Bay to the south, Aboriginal people had been absorbed into the local pastoral economy. As Rae Blake, wife of the owner of Giralia Station, put it, ‘the Aborigines didn’t live in towns, they were on all the stations’ — her own, some 100 kilometres (63 miles) to the south; Exmouth Gulf, closer but not very close to the site of the VLF station; and Yardie Creek, between the west coast, facing Ningaloo Reef, and the mountains and canyons of the Cape peninsula that were to become the Cape Range National Park.

Emptiness combined with remoteness to provide security from the kind of local opposition always likely to occur around American bases in places such as Guam or the Philippines. After
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

Potshot was abandoned at the end of World War II, visitors to North West Cape and Exmouth Gulf were few and temporary. Commercial fishing activity was spasmodic and precarious and it would be the late twentieth century before the abundance of marine life around the Ningaloo Reef close to the shore on the ocean side of the Cape would be recognised and stimulate a tourist industry.

In the early 1950s, 14-year-old Kevin Steicke was a deckhand on the *John Jim*, a vessel owned by the Hunt’s canning company in Albany on the distant south coast. After trawling for salmon close to home in the summer months, the company moved to northern waters in winter for a few years, setting up a fish-processing factory in Exmouth Gulf. The discovery of huge ‘banana’ prawns raised hopes of greater commercial success. But, as Steicke recalled in 2010, catches were either non-existent or too large for a small venture to handle. Trawling in the gulf did yield reminders of World War II: an abundance of dumped aircraft ammunition and, on small islands, belly tanks of aircraft. But when a cyclone in 1957 blew down the Hunt’s factory it was not replaced. Cray fishermen, according to Steicke, felt they were going ‘to the ends of the earth’ if they ventured as far as Jurien Bay, a mere 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of Perth. Sustained commercial exploitation of the gulf’s marine resources would begin only in the 1960s with the emergence of Michael Kailis’s prawn-processing venture at Learmonth at much the same time as development of the town of Exmouth was proceeding.

In 1956 Steicke watched a mushroom cloud rising to the north-west of the gulf: the deserted Monte Bello islands were a mere 130 kilometres (81 miles) from the Western Australian coast, but their selection as the site for two British atomic bomb tests in 1956 and an earlier one in 1952 underlined the remoteness and
near-emptiness of the vast region of the state stretching to the north of North West Cape. To the immediate north, the total population of the Pilbara – covering 507,896 square kilometres (196,100 square miles) – was a mere 8,907. The Kimberley had a larger population (12,700), predominantly Aboriginal, in a smaller area. Yet its 424,517 square kilometres (163,907 square miles) made it slightly bigger than California or Germany, 15 per cent larger than Japan and three times the size of England.7
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

There seemed plenty of room for the British – still clinging to their delusions of major-power status – to fire Blue Streak ballistic missiles from Woomera in South Australia into the Kimberley. In 1959 the British government established Talgarno village on land excised from the Anna Plains pastoral station, roughly halfway between Port Hedland and Broome, to monitor the accuracy of the missiles. When the huge costs of maintaining a missile program ended the Blue Streak project in the early 1960s, Talgarno was closed down but soon reappeared in speculation about US intentions to establish a communication station.  

Meanwhile, with seemingly limitless resources, the United States had launched its exploration of space and found an important role for Western Australia. From 1960 until 1963 Muchea Tracking Station, just 57 kilometres (35 miles) north of Perth, was the only one outside the United States capable of communicating directly with the manned spacecraft of the Mercury program. When Perth switched on its lights in 1962 to greet astronaut John Glenn in the first manned orbital mission it became the ‘City of Light’ in its own estimation (though not that of numerous other cities around the world claiming the same title for different reasons, notably Paris and Las Vegas). From 1963 the Gemini, Apollo and Skylab manned space missions would be supported by the NASA tracking station near Carnarvon some 900 kilometres (560 miles) north of Perth. Carnarvon was the most substantial town immediately to the south of North West Cape, a not-so-immediate 354 kilometres (220 miles) away on a dirt road.

By the early 1960s the Liberal Western Australian government of Sir David Brand was not content to see the north of the state as a usefully empty place to assist international friends. Although oil discovered by West Australian Petroleum Pty Ltd (WAPET) in the ranges adjacent to North West Cape had proven inadequate
for commercial development, there was no doubt of the huge potential of iron ore deposits revealed in the early 1950s in the Pilbara. Heavy annual rainfall gave the pastoral Kimberley region the potential for a more diverse agriculture through the new Ord River Irrigation Scheme.

The government’s energetic minister for industrial development, Charles Court, was determined that the mining of ore and building of railways and ports essential to its export should lead to the creation of new communities, rather than transient work camps. The same vision initially meant the state government welcomed the establishment of a United States base at North West Cape and especially a new township with potential for the development of tourism. A major problem confronting Court’s hopes for northern development was finance. Unable to generate sufficient revenue even for its existing needs, Western Australia had long been a so-called mendicant state, requiring special assistance from the Commonwealth Grants Commission. Court was able to solve the problem of getting iron ore to the coast by turning to private enterprise: the mining companies built their own railroads. But there was no value to the private sector, beyond the construction stage, in building either a communication station or a new township. The state government initially would need more help from Canberra if a new community at the Cape was to be created.9

There was never any doubt about the Commonwealth government’s support. Australia had famously turned to the United States in 1941, when Britain was no longer capable of providing protection against the Japanese advance across the Pacific. The ANZUS Treaty of mutual defence between the two countries and New Zealand, signed in 1951, had formalised that change but it had never been put to the test. There was no more fervent supporter of the United States’ prosecution of the Cold War than
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

the Australian Liberal–Country Party Coalition government of Sir Robert Menzies. Australian troops joined a nominal United Nations force, fighting communism in Korea in the early 1950s. At home, the Menzies government’s attempts to outlaw the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) by legislation and then national referendum in 1951 failed. But ferocious anti-communism continued in the Australian community, fuelled particularly by the defection of the Soviet KGB agent Vladimir Petrov in 1954 and a subsequent royal commission into espionage that undermined the political credibility of the leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposition, Dr H.V. Evatt. A justice of the High Court and respected international figure through his work in the creation of the United Nations and as president of its General Assembly in 1948–49, Evatt was a brilliant intellectual whose erratic performance at the royal commission was soon equalled by the disarray of his party.

From 1955 Australia’s preferential voting system enabled Menzies to benefit from the support of the militantly anti-communist Democratic Labor Party (DLP) that had split from the ALP. Even though the Menzies government was reluctant to admit it publicly – or even privately in its correspondence with the Western Australian government – it was willing to provide any help its state counterpart required to ensure the establishment of an American presence at North West Cape.

In 1959 there were preliminary talks between the naval commanders-in-chief of the two countries about the establishment of an American communication station. These discussions became firm plans in 1960. When Minister for Defence Athol Townley made the first official Australian announcement in parliament on 8 September 1960 there was none of the political and public uproar that would follow three years later.¹⁰ Nor did Australia’s
embrace of its new ‘great and powerful friend’ mean that it had severed its links with its traditional one. In the early 1960s, in a last flourish of regional cooperation with ‘the mother country’, Australian troops were supporting Britain in its confrontation with Indonesia over the creation of Malaysia. On 14 October 1961 *The Sydney Morning Herald* carried a report from the North American Newspaper Alliance that Britain, faced with losing its air and naval base at Singapore when the island merged with Malaya the following year, planned to transfer it to Western Australia. Noting that ‘the United States has already announced plans to build a naval radio station near Exmouth Gulf’, the report continued: ‘the British base would be at Fremantle, Cockburn Sound, or Albany’. According to ‘well-informed Canberra sources’ Australia ‘would contribute generously to such a transfer’.11

While nothing came of this rumoured initiative, 1961 also brought extensive correspondence between the British Royal Navy and Admiralty, the United States Navy (USN) and Australian authorities in London about use of the proposed communications station. With Britain not yet clearly determined to withdraw from ‘east of Suez’, it was felt that ‘there might be a need for VLF communications facilities to cover the Indian Ocean and China Sea for Royal Navy nuclear submarines operating in the future in these areas’. There was no Australian objection to the news that the British Admiralty was ‘considering the possibility of approaching the US with a view to sharing the US Station’.12 With no nuclear submarines of its own the Australian Government eventually supported limited use of the VLF facilities arranged by the Royal Navy with the USN.13

Although the United States had committed itself to an Indian Ocean base at North West Cape, in October 1962 a long analysis in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of the new strategic situation facing
Australia did not raise a question that would become contentious in the 1970s: did the ANZUS reference to cooperation in the Pacific cover the whole of Australia? Instead, the newspaper argued that the treaty had the potential to involve the Americans in conflict with Indonesia, bringing ‘acute embarrassment’ to the United States, ‘which did not regard the ANZUS Treaty as anything more than a step toward the creation of a broad anti-communist front in the Pacific’. Similarly, in 1964 the reported concern of the United States was to avoid being ‘drawn into any military commitment in Indonesia’s “crush Malaysia” campaign in Borneo’ as a result of the ANZUS pact, should Australia come under attack after committing military forces to defend Malaysian Borneo.

In 1961 the Western Australian public could read accurate speculation about the purpose of an American communication station. But they were still unaware of its location. On 3 March 1961 *The West Australian* had no doubt that ‘the construction of a giant radio station by the United States navy’ was of ‘far-reaching importance in free world security’, enabling the United States to communicate with ‘its world-ranging fleet of atomic submarines armed with the Polaris nuclear missile’. But the newspaper felt that the likeliest site – and certainly ‘the most advantageous to us’ – was Talgarno because ‘it would make use of costly Anglo-Australian construction which lost its purpose when Britain abandoned the Blue Streak as a military missile’. A longer-term and more substantial advantage was that the United States would be committed to a strategic stake in the security of the north-west, ‘which, facing the Indian Ocean, is a vital but inadequately guarded sector of Australian and free world defence’. Long before the decision was finalised to create an ‘integrated’ support township, *The West Australian* editorial envisaged ‘a new Australian-American
community’ during construction and supplying the base when it became operational.16

Unknown to the newspaper, American plans were by now firmly fixed on North West Cape. In June 1960 Lieutenant Robert E. ‘Bud’ Alexander had been assigned to the ‘US Naval Officer in Charge of Construction (OICC), VLF Australia’ in Los Angeles. The OICC was based there, recalled Alexander in 2011, ‘because that was the location of the design engineering firm (Holmes and Narver INC) for the future VLF at North West Cape’. In June 1961 Alexander flew to Australia with the OICC, Captain James T. Maley. They stopped off in Canberra ‘at a time when they were starting to talk about the Status of Forces Agreement’, recalled Alexander, although he knew nothing of the details of discussions. His immediate future lay in Western Australia where it was his responsibility to prepare for the future transfer of the OICC organisation to manage construction of the communications station.

Interviewed in 2010, pastoralist Denver Blake from Giralia Station was uncertain about exactly when a call on ‘pedal radio’ from his friend Gerry Lefroy – his counterpart at Exmouth Gulf Station – told him that two Americans had arrived out of the blue, asking to hire a small boat that Blake kept at Exmouth Gulf. Only when he heard rumours a little later of American plans to build a large tower did he realise that the boat must have been used to familiarise its hirers with the local waters, presumably of the long narrow gulf itself, as his craft was hardly big enough for the coastal waters around Ningaloo Reef. This encounter must have been earlier than August 1961 when both the Lefroys and the Broad family at Yardie Creek were in negotiations with the state and federal governments to release land for the communication towers and the projected base.17 There were no such demands on
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

Denver Blake’s much more distant pastoral lease, but on his next visit to the Cape ‘there were survey pegs everywhere’.

Almost fifty years later Bob Ruscoe reflected on his five weeks as one of the men planting those pegs in 1962. Ruscoe was employed with four or five others by the firm Crossland and Hardy to gain practical surveying experience as part of his qualifications for a diploma in cartography. Claiming a far from perfect recollection of the period ‘as a cohesive story’, he still provided a vivid account of the pain and pleasures of life at the Cape, where ‘the isolation was palpable’ and accommodation primitive. The only inhabitants within reach were the lighthouse keepers at Vlamingh Head, a few Americans further south at a camp they had established at a place called Ned’s Well, and a few Australians at the basic airstrip facilities much further south still at Learmonth. Ruscoe had taken his own tent, ‘which initially doubled as a work area’ with boards balanced on four sewerage pipes serving as a table. The pain included the assaults of vicious sandflies ‘squashed onto the paper we were using to record the survey on and … biting my bare legs to the point of distraction’. He responded by cutting two holes for his feet in the bottom corners of an old chaff bag and tying the top of the bag around his waist with fencing wire. Foremost among the recalled pleasures was a leisure time drive north to the lighthouse and then south down the west coast to Yardie Creek: ‘it was a truly beautiful and remote place. You could stand on the edge of the small cliff that bordered the creek and see huge fish cruising nonchalantly below’.

As a non-drinker, Ruscoe often felt on the margins of a group that became wilder as both its stories and evening pile of beer cans grew taller. He recalled his ineptitude with a gun with some relief, ashamed that one of the favourite pastimes of the men was ‘spotlighting’ kangaroos: ‘on one occasion I can remember we shot
nineteen ‘roos in an hour and a half’. On another, the cook in the mess kitchen suddenly ‘peeled back the clip-on flyscreen, grabbed his rifle and shot an emu through the window’. A highlight of the week was to drive to Learmonth to see a movie:

On the way we would stand on the dropped down tailgate of the Land Rover and shoot at anything that moved, and a few things that didn’t. In the hall there would be men sitting with a gun, a dog and a few cans by their side while they enjoyed the show. Then we would repeat the shooting experience as we drove back to camp.

The only local fauna safe from the marauding surveyors on safari were in the water. Attempted shark shooting was popular and zigzagging fins very visible, but they never hit one: ‘the water was their protection’.

As the USN civil engineer in charge of the project, Bud Alexander was less intimidated by the Cape’s frontier conditions than Bob Ruscoe. Born in west Texas in June 1935, Alexander had done enough research ‘to know WA was sparsely populated, mainly in the south and along the coast but the north pretty vacant’. Raised in the American south-west, he ‘wasn’t too worried about the hot and dry climate of the northwest’ of Western Australia. When he arrived at Learmonth:

the total population of the cape was eight people, counting the cook and handy man at the WAPET camp and the station owners, the Lefroys at Exmouth station and the Broads at Yardie Creek. The landscape was not that different from west Texas or New Mexico with the
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

dust, dirt roads, and wire fences. Of course the animals were totally different with the big red kangaroos and emus. The number of species of birds was a surprise and the land lizards were new to me. Generally I really liked the area.

Alexander’s first impressions of Perth were also positive:

Such a beautiful city in the middle of no place. The Swan River Bridge, the river, and the pretty tiled-roof homes presented a pleasing picture of prosperity and established society. The city area was also impressive with some modern buildings but also with the architecture of earlier times still evident.

Soon he was even more impressed by one of Perth’s inhabitants. After interviewing him about the project, a journalist invited Alexander to a small dinner party in Dalkeith, one of Perth’s most desirable riverside suburbs. There he met his host’s daughter, Elwyn Potter, ‘a beautiful young woman’, a physical therapist, and the head of the physical therapy department at the Repatriation Hospital in Perth. ‘We hit it off immediately, started dating and were married on January 24, 1963’.

Both before and immediately after his marriage Alexander split his time between the Cape and Perth. As resident engineer, he was later to be in the north for longer periods, when the USN began awarding contracts for the construction of a communication station that was destined to spread over a vast area in alphabetically designated sections. Area A was to cover 5,600 acres at the northern end of the peninsula. Through a network of wires, twelve towers were to support the 387-metre (1,276 feet)
central Tower Zero, the actual VLF transmitter of underwater messages to submarines. Here too would be the power plant both for Area A itself and for Area B, 10 kilometres (6 miles) to the south. In Area B, the home of the station’s administrative, accommodation and recreational base, there was also to be a High Frequency Transmitter (HFT) building that would relay messages to surface ships and bases from the High Frequency Receiver (HFR) in Area C, some 48 kilometres (30 miles) to the south. In addition to the communication station itself, the plans required construction of a pier on the gulf side of the peninsula for the loading of materials and for other requirements of the USN.
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

Eventually the North West Cape project would require large numbers of skilled and semi-skilled construction workers and surveyors, both on site and in offices in the recently built Council House in Perth, where there would also be accountants, clerks and other USN and Australian civilian office personnel.

But before the vast project could even begin to be implemented Alexander had to address problems fundamental to its viability. His immediate concerns were to find sources for water and concrete aggregates:

It was recognized early on that adequate supplies of potable water would be limited. This was a top priority assigned to me in the early days. With the drilling capability available under contract I began to search for water. I found out quickly that there was very little fresh water at elevations close to sea level; that one had to
follow creek beds to higher elevations and drill down to a depth near sea level.

Almost half a century later Alexander acknowledged his good fortune in receiving excellent advice from Trevor Nossiter – a Commonwealth Supply Department official (who had been 'seconded as a technical assistant', reported *The Sydney Morning Herald*) – both about where to look for water and how to access it. Knowing that 'there was a salt water lens at sea level elevation across the whole site,' Nossiter suggested 'there might be a lens of fresh water perched on that lens'. When that proved to be the case:

he also helped me understand that if you have a thin lens of fresh water so perched you can't pump it too quickly or it will draw in the salt water: you have to put in low capacity pumps and several of them so you spread them out, so you're just kind of sipping the fresh water off the top.

An article in *The West Australian* on 29 October 1963 described how the 'sipping' process could threaten the sanity of the 'sipper'. Extracting water 'from a depth of 40 feet [12 metres] at the slow rate of four inches [10 centimetres] an hour', one driller had apparently 'built a cairn of rocks on a nearby hill to pass the time away'.

Fortunately, long before this worker began piling his rocks, the search for water had also solved the problem of finding a suitable concrete aggregate. Alexander was unaware, when interviewed in 2011, that the USN had been testing the region’s distinctive pindan soil before he arrived but he remained convinced it had too much clay content to have been suitable. In 1961 he had been ‘looking for a hard stone that could be crushed into the
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

various sizes that you need to make a good concrete mix’. Drilling for water near Ned’s Well creek, he discovered ‘a cliff face 30 feet [9 metres] or so above the creek bed that looked like a good source of solid unfractured limestone’. Confirming that the material was excellent, and determined that the USN would control it, he had the area surveyed and set aside, so that a contractor could crush the rock but be unable to get exclusive rights to seize control and dictate the price. Interviewed in 2011, after a return visit to the Cape, Alexander was delighted at his success in finding and securing an ideal source for the concrete in the anchor blocks for the communication towers: indeed, he could find no cracks or other signs of deterioration in the blocks. He would have felt doubly vindicated had he known that the chosen contractor, G. H. Reid, now trading as Specified Services Pty Ltd, attempted in 1967 to acquire ‘direct rights over the land on which our materials are stockpiled’ and was finally rebuffed in 1970.22

In May 1962, after Alexander had found solutions to issues basic to the feasibility of the North West Cape project, its existence became official and public through formal federal cabinet approval. The message that cabinet authorised Minister for External Affairs Garfield Barwick to send to his American counterpart, Dean Rusk, was heavy with emphasis on a significant Australian role in the project, even though there was to be no ‘financial commitment on the part of the Australian government’. Rather, it was made clear that ‘the facilities would be available to the Australian armed forces under appropriate conditions’; ‘maximum use would be made of Australian resources’; and the parties would ‘consult from time to time on matters connected with the station and its use’. The crucial clause in the same message was that ‘it is the intention of the parties to conclude a Status of Forces Agreement [SOFA] in due course’.23 Negotiation of a SOFA – establishing
the extent to which American forces were subject to, or immune from, Australian law – was to prove much more difficult than either party had expected. Moreover, time would show that unavoidable flaws in the SOFA meant that the plan to create a totally successful integrated Australian-American support township was doomed to fail.

But while the protracted SOFA negotiations delayed the development of the township of Exmouth, work on the communication station proceeded more rapidly, despite inevitable teething problems. By February 1963 Bud Alexander had already devoted three years, in the United States and Australia, to planning and on-site exploration to make the North West Cape project feasible. He had now been joined by a second civil engineer.

In the northern spring of 1962, when Mike Smith graduated from Oregon State University, the USN’s graduate program seemed a good opportunity for a newly minted civil engineer to complete his professional accreditation instead of facing the draft into one of the armed services. A chance to see the world at a time when the United States ‘wasn’t at war’ was attractive – even more so when the Cuban Missile Crisis coincided with his graduation ceremony in October. An opportunity to volunteer for three months training in southern California seemed preferable to involvement in a possible conflict with the Soviet Union that ‘wasn’t what I’d signed up for the navy for’. When asked to fill out a preference list for a posting, he had no knowledge of Australia and simply nominated overseas duty in construction work. Receiving his orders to go to North West Cape, he was thrilled when a trip to the library revealed its location. After enjoying summer jobs in Alaska he found the remoteness of the Cape appealing.
Smith arrived in Perth in January 1963 on a night flight from Sydney. By this time his superior officer, Alexander, was not only recently married but settled into a routine that usually took him to the Cape for four days a week, allowing time for paperwork in the Perth offices that the OICC now occupied in Council House in the city centre. He also had time to include Smith in his social circle, introducing him to ‘some eligible young ladies’ almost as soon as he emerged from his first night in the Freeway Hotel in South Perth. Arriving at the same time as Smith was Phil Hampton, a lieutenant specialising in logistics and financial management. Although Hampton was older, of superior rank to ensign Smith and the two had met for the first time on the long flight from the US, they soon agreed to share an apartment in South Perth. Time would prove it was fortunate for Smith that they did not share all their social life.

With little work for him yet at the Cape, Smith spent most of his early months in Perth familiarising himself with the project. But he made one early trip north with Bud Alexander, flying in an unpressurised MacRobertson Miller Airlines (MMA) aircraft, stopping at Geraldton and Carnarvon before they were met at Learmonth by people servicing the camp established at Ned’s Well – a married couple, Geoff and Maureen Johnson, hired by the USN, and an Englishman, Les Corbett, seconded by the Australian Government. The 56-kilometre (35-mile) drive to Ned’s Well in Land Rovers leased by the Navy revealed ‘nothing but scrub’ at places identified by Alexander as the sites for the Exmouth town site, the high-frequency radio station, and the future administrative area. Ned’s Well proved to be a well-appointed camp, able to accommodate up to fifteen people in small temporary quarters,
while the caretaker Johnsons lived in a caravan. Facilities included a mess hall, ablution block, toilet, solar hot water heater and showers, washing machine, a diesel power plant and, recalled Smith, one of the best-quality water wells in the area, ‘although water quality deteriorated with time’. The two civil engineers looked at construction plans and visited the site of the thirteen future towers for the VLF transmitter. Marking the precise spot from where the central Tower Zero was destined to soar over 387 metres (1,270 feet) was an iron stake crowned by a Swan Lager beer can.

If that moment foreshadowed the arrival of a rowdy, sweating, swearing multitude of men, for the moment Smith was ‘thrilled’ by the wider and wilder surroundings. He had never seen ‘beaches so pretty’ and an environment so remote that the only human presence was at the lighthouse and on the stations at Exmouth Gulf and Yardie Creek. It seemed people could not wait to tell him that Murray and Trudy Broad at Yardie Creek employed a beautiful governess he just had to meet. She had once worked as a model and proved to be seriously ‘gorgeous’. She was the only female of his age in the area and they became friends but no more than that. In early 1963 it was another eighteen months before Smith would meet his future Australian wife.

Interviewed almost half a century later both Smith and Alexander had warm memories of relations with the Broads and Lefroys. Always welcomed at their homesteads, they were unaware that both families had nursed serious misgivings about the plans for the communication station long before either of the civil engineers arrived on the scene. By August 1961 negotiations were under way between the Lefroys, their lawyers and the Department of the Interior about the resumption of 9,472 acres of their Exmouth Gulf pastoral lease to accommodate all
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

the ambitious but as yet unannounced plans for the American presence at the Cape. Eventually, compensation of £5,500 would end an ambit claim, probably driven particularly by their Perth lawyer, for £14,747. Although that result was achieved as late as September 1965, in April 1963 the Department forwarded notice of compulsory requisition of the land through the same lawyer.24

On 2 July 1963 Bud Alexander was part of a joint Western Australian Government and USN delegation visiting Bill Broad at Yardie Creek. The internal state government report confirmed that the Americans were ‘anxious to co-operate in any way consistent with the necessity for the proper functioning of the Communications Centre’. But the state official, K. Hudson, referred to ‘the concern of the Broad brothers … connected with the large numbers of people who will be in the area during the construction period and after the establishment of the proposed town’. The next day the delegation visited the Lefroys, who ‘will apparently suffer little interference either during construction or as a result of fencing the exclusive use areas’. But ‘here again the concern is for what might happen due to the influx of people, particularly during the construction period and after the establishment of the town site’.25

Underlying these visits to the pastoralists whose land was to be used for the North West Cape facilities was a sense of urgency now that the ‘proposed’ communication station and support township had finally been given political approval.

On 6 March 1963 the bill to approve the agreement between Australia and the United States to establish the communication station was presented to the Australian Parliament. The ‘nature of the station and its capacities’ had ‘already been described by the prime minister on 17 May 1962’, said the minister for
external affairs, Sir Garfield Barwick, and the government ‘had the constitutional capacity to sign the agreement without further Parliamentary authority’. There can be no doubt the Menzies government took this course not primarily in a spirit of pure democracy but as an opportunity to foster further disarray in the opposition ALP, with its well-known divisions over Cold War policy. There had been a recent reminder of the potential for further Soviet espionage in Australia.

In early February 1963 a Soviet diplomat, Ivan Fedorovich Skripov, was ordered to leave Australia on suspicion of ‘attempting to break through the security curtain surrounding the Woomera rocket range in South Australia’. His ejection led to much less controversy, either within Australia or in the country’s relations with the Soviet Union, than had accompanied the dramatic Petrov case nine years earlier. But just as that affair had reinforced serious Australian concerns about communism and widened the ideological rift between the incumbent Menzies government and opposition ALP, the treatment of Skripov did draw attention – in the words of Garfield Barwick – to ‘another obvious target for Russian espionage activity … the naval radio communication station which the United States is to establish at North West Cape in Western Australia’. A project already well advanced, but discussed by the Australian cabinet for the first time only nine months before the Skripov incident, was now clearly in the public arena, not least because the quoted words were in The Times of London.

There was bipartisan support for the establishment of the American station. But within the House of Representatives fierce opposition from left-wing ALP members gave Menzies and his ministers the opportunity to attack their wounded rival. Alan Reid, a prominent political journalist hostile to Labor, had arranged for a
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

photograph to be taken of the ALP leader, Arthur Calwell, and his deputy, Gough Whitlam, waiting outside a Canberra hotel, while an ALP conference inside was deciding the party’s policy towards the new US base. Reid’s commentary on the influence exercised by ‘36 Faceless Men’ (one of whom was actually a woman) made it easy to portray the ALP’s parliamentary leadership as under the control of unelected individuals, some of them tainted by actual or supposed communist affiliations.\footnote{28}

The narrowness of the conference’s vote, 19–17 in favour of the American base, would give political ammunition to the Coalition government for months to come. It had only just avoided defeat in the 1961 federal election – an election that had been overshadowed by a rare economic recession. The Cuban Missile Crisis, just a few months before the crucial vote on the North West Cape station, may have influenced both extremes of public opinion. While it certainly reinforced the fears of those already hostile to anything connected to nuclear warfare, the most acute international crisis since 1945 was also a warning to those who saw the United States as Australia’s only guarantor of security in a world polarised by the Cold War. What was now certain in February 1963 was that Menzies could campaign for the next election with new evidence of the dangers of entrusting government to the ALP. According to the prime minister, the people of Australia had been given

a sharp reminder that an Australian Labor Government would not be responsible to the people or even to its own judgment. It would be bound hand and foot by the decisions of 36 people forming the ALP conference not elected by the people of Australia and in no sense responsible to them.
‘I sympathise with my friend Mr Calwell’, Menzies continued with blatant insincerity:

For the leader of a party and an aspiring prime minister of Australia to be compelled to hang around in hotel corridors until his masters inside have given him his instructions is a complete denial of leadership.\(^{29}\)

The prime minister made even more of the proviso attached to the ALP conference’s grudging support for the North West Cape project: that, if the United States was at war or threatened by war, the station would not be used in any way that would involve Australia, without the prior knowledge and consent of the Australian government.

This was, according to Menzies, ‘a most dangerous and frustrating condition … in matters of life and death for Australia surely we know who our friends are and what side we are on in relation to them’.\(^{30}\)

While Menzies’ humiliation of Labor almost ensured his re-election on 30 November 1963, a measured response to the agreement to establish the base by the ALP deputy leader, Gough Whitlam, prepared the way for his own eventual policies as prime minister. The agreement was ‘quite satisfactory’, in Whitlam’s view, but the ALP objected to a letter from Barwick ‘foregoing any right of consultation’ should the United States use the base in a war not involving Australia. On the other hand, and in stark contrast, ‘if the United States were attacked, Australia would be immediately involved under the Anzus Pact’.\(^{31}\)

On 31 May 1963 – a month before that latest exchange of muted hostilities between the Menzies government and the
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

ALP – parliament had approved the agreement between the two countries giving the United States the right to operate the communications station for twenty-five years. A letter from the chief property officer in the Ministry of the Interior in Canberra authorised OICC Captain Maley to commence ‘on site’ the project to build the communication station and ‘pier facilities at North West Cape’.

On 26 July 1963 The New York Times reported that the Navy Bureau of Yards had awarded a $34,800,000 contract for construction of the North West Cape communication station and USN pier to Paul Hardeman Inc. – a subsidiary of the Universal American Corporation – in a joint venture with two Australian companies, Concrete Industries (Monier) Ltd and Hutchinson Brothers Pty Ltd. This was the start of an eventually litigious relationship between Hardeman-Monier-Hutchinson (HMH) and the USN.

A sod-turning ceremony marking the start of construction on 27 October 1963 took place at least two months after the real work was well under way. Soaking rain at the start of the project prevented the movement of heavy transports on inadequate roads. But by 31 August, twenty-eight men were doing preliminary clearing and roadwork at the site and ‘lost time would be made up by working extra shifts’, said HMH’s American project manager, Jim Kromas. By the end of October drilling for the 13-metre (42-foot) casings for Tower Zero was almost finished; 170 men were working six days a week and, reported The West Australian, more were arriving every day. Sites for thirteen big steel towers had been marked over an area of 16 square kilometres (6 square miles). More than 80 kilometres (50 miles) of road had been
graded and bulldozing was proceeding fast along the beach for the 366-metre (1,200-foot) long pier. Five water bores had been dug – one from solid rock – and water was being pumped from 11 kilometres (7 miles) away to the cement-mixing plant near the tower area. By the time it arrived through plastic pipes it was ‘boiling hot’. Giant fans cooled it in tanks before it was transferred into cement mixers at night. Trucks took 6 cubic metres (6 cubic yards) of cement each to the tower sites.34

Mike Smith later recalled how important this cooling process was but also took especial delight in his memory of a health inspector who complained that bell-shaped holes drilled through the rock were a breeding ground for mosquitoes. As the holes were there in preparation for anchors for the caissons needed to support Tower Zero, Bud Alexander was able to placate the inspector by promising to fill them with concrete.

On the whole, however, Smith was having a far from amusing time. Alexander, the more senior of the two USN engineers, was untroubled by what he regarded as inevitable arguments with HMH. It was navy policy to choose the lowest tender for contracts and normal for a contractor to seize any opportunity to claim increased payments for difficulties impeding progress and not specified in the contract. But Alexander admitted that his less-experienced assistant found it stressful to document inadequate work and to challenge claims for expensive variations to contractual details. ‘We carried the whole burden of quality control’, said Mike Smith in 2010. Once a month he would try to estimate what percentage of a section of work had been done before sending the information to Perth for cheques to be paid to HMH. Reflecting that ‘we may have been overly aggressive’, Smith remembered that Trevor Nossiter, the Australian liaison officer, who had become a close friend, was aghast at some of the things the Americans
wanted to document when they asked him to write ‘some nasty letters’ on their behalf.

Even though the Australian preparations for building the communication station were mired in political controversy in Canberra and half throttled by lack of finance in Perth, the project was proceeding in an era of full and mobile employment. By the 1960s Australia’s largest ever civil engineering project, the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric scheme, inaugurated in 1949, was well under way. By the time it was completed in 1974 it would have employed some 100,000 workers drawn from more than thirty countries. While some workers moved on from the Snowy to the new opportunities in the West, the postwar revolution in immigration policy was drawing in tens of thousands of others from non-traditional European sources.

With spring weather well advanced in late October, Allan Oliveira of Sydney – assistant to Kromas – felt the need to mention that the workers’ camp was ‘certainly not a tourist resort’: ‘we may be in the tropics but it is not Hayman Island’, he said, in a reference to one of the more famous resorts in Queensland’s Whitsunday Passage. But, said The West Australian, prefabricated aluminium accommodation units were ‘the best in the North West’: forty had been erected in the past two months. The workers received free accommodation and earned an average of £40 to £50 a week. A 67-metre (220-foot) long mess and recreation hall was nearly finished. And although the workforce already comprised more than fifteen nationalities, regularly disposing of 800 beer cans per night, camp life was ‘very quiet’.35

It was fortunate for John Maxwell Brackenbury – always known as ‘Bob’ – that it was quiet. A country policeman, based in Geraldton since 1960, Brackenbury was 24 years old when
he applied for the ‘one-man operation’ at the North West Cape construction site. His arrival there on 27 October 1963 was timed to provide a police presence at the symbolic soil turning by Western Australian Premier David Brand to mark the official commencement of work now two months under way. But Brackenbury’s longer-term role was anything but ceremonial. The official specification for the job was for a single man with bush experience. A deputy police commissioner summoned him to Perth from Geraldton and ‘laid things on the line’, saying, ‘you’re going up to what could be a wild situation and you’re going to have to do things the way you think fit’. More reassuring was the popular story he learned later. Allan Oliveira had ‘marched down to the commissioner of police’ in Perth, saying that HMH wanted a police presence but would deal with most issues themselves: they asked for ‘a big policeman with big boots and a small notebook’. Whatever the truth of that story, after arriving on site the day about 150 workers were shifting out of tents into huts, Brackenbury saw himself mainly as a ‘token law and order man’ at a time when Exmouth was not yet a gazetted police station or police area. There was not much trouble because HMH made it clear that workers transgressing in any way would be expelled: if a fight occurred both parties would be out of the area on the first available transport.

As the workforce continued to expand in the months ahead, the policeman had to be aware of rumours of illegal gambling. Mike Smith was ‘invited to a place way out in the bush between the road and Exmouth Gulf. There was a lantern strung between trees illuminating a dice table, thirty or forty men betting and even a guy with a green eyeshade.’

There was also a two-up game: ‘the whole thing was run by Australians’ and Smith was the only American there. He saw
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

‘a young Australian kid put 700 pounds down on a 50–50 bet and lose’. But if Brackenbury expediently failed to pursue rumours that might have seen him hopelessly outnumbered, his rather unorthodox working routine equipped him to respond decisively on the rare occasions he had to handle troublemakers on or near the construction site.

However small his notebook, he did spend more time than he liked on paperwork. Bored and resentful that much of his job involved issuing Western Australian driving licences to the many workers who arrived with ones from the eastern states, he took a part-time job driving trucks for the Australian sub-contractor, G. H. Reid. While such moonlighting was not officially condoned, it was also informally allowed, even when he had been based in Geraldton. His seniors expected it to be done discreetly but only frowned hard on police connections with the hotel or racing industries. Brackenbury felt his truck-driving at the Cape probably gave him credibility ‘as a guy who got his hands dirty’ rather than an aloof authority figure. Yet he had arrived prepared and willing to wield authority if necessary.

The man who held the liquor licence, working for the American logistics contractor BURTCO, was ‘an ex-London bobby who knew how to handle things pretty well’. But, lacking a police lock-up for his first four or five months, Brackenbury one day faced taunts from a drunken ‘Australian yobbo’. He had arrived at the Cape with handcuffs and chains of a kind sadly familiar to many Western Australians in old photographs of naked Aboriginal prisoners in the Kimberley. Deciding he should jump on this ridicule ‘early in the piece’, he handcuffed and then chained the man to a grader, taking care that the chain was too short for his prisoner to be able to drive the machine away. During a two- or three-hour sobering-up process the taunter himself became...
the object of derision from workmates, some taking photographs. Although a few suggested this unorthodox policing might land the policeman in trouble, it was his opponent who was sacked the next day.

If Brackenbury had an aura of authority it came from decisive action and his considerable size, not from the police uniform he wore only on official occasions. Seeing himself as ‘a farm lad from way back’, he had little respect for Jim Kromas – ‘an American who looked Greek’. Kromas can hardly be blamed for taking delivery of a Piper Aztec in September 1963. But the acquisition of the six-seat, £36,000 company plane, equipped with ‘night-flying instruments’ and capable of the Perth–Exmouth trip in four hours, may well have fed a self-importance he expressed by wearing three stars on his hard hat. Brackenbury responded by painting four stars on his own when he visited the construction site.

Kromas, it must be said, did have an exacting job in a constantly evolving environment. In mid-October The West Australian reported that

the big project is acting like a magnet to job-seekers. An average of three men drive into the camp each day looking for work. One day 20 men arrived and asked for jobs. Many of these men have come from the Eastern states, driving across the north of Australia and down the west coast. “It is useless men coming here looking for work,” said Jim Kromas. “All our labour is being signed on in Perth.”

At that moment the biggest change was the imminent arrival of just four people. The expectation had been that the workforce would be all male and ‘all clerical work could be handled
adequately from Perth, but this proved impracticable’. Australia-
wide advertising for male staff ‘was fruitless, so the company bowed
to the inevitable and advertised for women’. Their introduction
meant a reorganisation of living quarters and facilities in the
construction camp.

It also meant an opportunity for ‘human interest’ stories in
interstate as well as Western Australian newspapers about four
young women, chosen from thirty applicants, ‘to work among
146 men – and later that number may increase to 800’, said the
Sydney Sun-Herald. ‘It’s a man’s world ahead for these four
Perth girls chosen as typists and ledger machinists for the North
West Cape radio base in Western Australia’, read the caption in
The Brisbane Telegraph beneath a photograph of June Hurn, June
Gwyther, Janice Clements and Thea MacDonald being farewelled
by relatives at Perth airport on their way to nine-hours-a-day,
six-days-a-week jobs.

The newspapers left it to readers to imagine the details of the
lives the women were likely to lead in the crude environment
of a frontier construction site. But Janice Clements and Thea
MacDonald had mainly happy memories of their stay when inter-
viewed together. The two were cousins, Jan, a comptometrist,
Thea, a ledger clerk. The two Junes, they recalled, were secre-
taries, Gwyther to a Monier manager, June Hurn working for the
G. H. Reid sub-contractor. Jan stayed a little longer at the Cape
than Thea, perhaps because she had already worked in Darwin
and the Kimberley. She had even shared a lunch with a visiting
state governor at Vlamingh Head in 1963, thanks to connections
through her grandfather, one-time chief engineer of Western
Australian lighthouses. But although twelve months would prove
long enough for Thea to spend in the isolated environment, both
women felt lucky to have had a unique experience.
Extremely attractive pay rates of about £50 per week – with tax breaks for working in the sub-tropics north of the 26th parallel – made them among the highest-paid women in Australia. In one year Jan saved enough to pay cash for a new car. They were given three basic but substantial meals a day, supplied by Poon’s, a firm that had supplied catering for the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, managed hostels and food services in the Snowy Mountains project and won the contract to supply food and services at North West Cape. From time to time the office women had free return trips to Perth in HMH’s Piper Aztec. And although Jan and Thea recalled Jim Kromas as a short, rather aggressive New Yorker, he took the trouble on one occasion to take them to a swimming hole excavated as a safe haven from the perils of open water.

Although the women also remembered Mike Smith through discussions about the calculation of weekly progress reports, at the time they arrived there was a distinct shortage of other navy men in their ‘very impressive’ uniforms. In their mealtime visits to the mess hall, the young women’s ‘miniskirts and sandals’ were no doubt equally impressive to the men around them. But with boyfriends, all drawn from an ‘inner core’ of management, none of them felt sexually threatened under the scrutiny of the male construction workers.

They evidently also felt less threatened by marine predators than Pix magazine suggested in March 1964.

Within easy reach of the camp are clean sandy beaches and the warm, crystal-clear water of the Indian Ocean. An inviting prospect – until you see the sharks cruising ten feet from the water’s edge. So the girls rarely go more than ankle-deep into the water. If they venture to knee-depth, a man with a .303 rifle must be posted as a
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

lookout. The sharks, too, are partial to bathing beauties in bikinis.40

With willing escorts for beach barbecues and fishing trips in small boats, Thea and Jan were well aware of the sharks cruising in large numbers in the gulf. A trip on a tugboat took them to a breeding ground for dozens of hammerheads. But, reassured by the sharks’ small size, they even enjoyed night excursions into the water, carrying screwdrivers to prise oysters from rocks for delicious snacks with tomato sauce. The only time Jan felt alarm at much larger sharks was on a trip on the ocean side of the Cape with the extravagantly bulky Murray Broad nonchalantly sitting on the edge of the very small boat.

Comfortable, though not luxurious, accommodation in a timber-lined donga, with one bathroom shared between two women, was comparable to the facilities for male supervisory staff and much better than the eight single rooms in a donga provided for the construction workers. They might have added that all of the on-site facilities offered greater comforts than the dust-clogged homes other women would eventually encounter in the caravan parks at the undeveloped Exmouth town site.

That influx still lay well in the future at the end of 1963 when the dream of an integrated Australian-American support town was only just achieving a flimsy substance. As the following chapter will show in detail, three-way political negotiations between the government of Australia, Western Australia and the United States had dragged on throughout the five months that work on the VLF facility was forging ahead. And even now fundamental flaws in the original commitment made to the United States had not been eliminated. Indeed, as the following chapter shows, there could have been no agreement without those flaws.
Notes
1 Murdoch to Director of Native Welfare, Perth, 14 August 1967. NAA: K530 SH1967/62.2B.
4 Operation Potshot – provision of advanced submarine base in WA. NAA: MP1158/8, 1824/2/249; Report on Operation ‘Potshot’ – 10/20 May 1944, ibid., A11095, 100/1/AIR.
5 Shire of Exmouth Minute, 10 July 1964. NAA: K530, SH1965/145.
6 Under-Secretary WA Premier’s Department to E. J. Bunting, Prime Minister’s Department, Canberra, 12 July 1962, Department of External Affairs, Confidential. NAA: A1838, 694/7/12/16 Part 1.
12 R. J. Greet, Department of External Affairs, to Mr Eastman, 13 September 1961, ‘Secret’ USNCS use by RN, RAN and USN, Department of External Affairs. NAA: A1838, 694/7/12.7.
13 Confidential Summary of USN, RN and RAN discussions on the use of VLF broadcasts at NWC, Washington 6, 7 May 1963. NAA: A1838, 694/7/12.7.
Politics, plans and preparations for a unique experiment

18 Ball, A Suitable Piece of Real Estate, p. 53.
19 Gavin Handley, ‘The U.S. Navy is building a base in our loneliest outback’, The Sydney Morning Herald, 18 November 1962, p. 84.
20 Peter Finn, ‘North West Cape base is being pushed ahead’, The West Australian, 29 October 1963, p. 4.
21 R. A. Ledger, Acting Director of Works to Director-General, Melbourne, 1 August 1961 for Attention of Mr A. Reiher: North West Cape – VLF Tracking Station Pindan Sands. NAA: PP280/1, USN1961/62/101/1.
22 Exchange of correspondence from 13 September 1967 to 20 July 1970 between G. H. Purdy, Director of G. H. Reid Pty Ltd and Lands Department of WA, Department of Interior WA, Department of the Navy, Canberra, and Murdoch, Civil Commissioner, Exmouth: NAA K530, 100/3/1 Part 2.
23 Submission to cabinet, no number, copy no. 00046, 3 May 1962. NAA: K530, 100/2/1.
26 Agreement Act number 30 – USNCS (United States Naval Communications Station, (Office of the Civil Commissioner, Exmouth). NAA: K530, 100/2/1.
30 ibid.
32 J. Youle Dean, Chief Property Officer to Officer-in-Charge of Construction, USN – VLF Project, Council House, Perth, 2 May 1963. NAA: K530, 100/3/1 PART 1.
34 ‘Road floods delay work at Exmouth’, The West Australian, 31 August 1963, p. 8; Finn, ‘North West Cape base’, 29 October 1963, p. 4.
A Little America in Western Australia

37 ibid.
39 *The Brisbane Telegraph*, 20 November 1963 (page details not indicated on cutting supplied to authors by Janice Clements and Thea Woodruff, née MacDonald).