

Woomera – Nothing to get in your way^{*}

**Actual tourist slogan*

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Field Rep
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1984 to 1993

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that University of Maryland instructors will seek out the farthest, most exotic assignment that can be extracted from their wary, gimlet-eyed supervisor.

And so they happily came to Woomera, Australia. Amazing! A mile-square, hot, dusty, fly-bitten village in the Australian outback would seem an unlikely attractor, but there was never a shortage of volunteers.

Woomera was unusual in that Australians ran just about everything except the technical parts of the facility and the APO. The story goes...and I cannot verify it, but anyway... The story goes that at the time the US government was negotiating to establish facilities in Australia, a delegation of Australian government representatives visited American bases in Germany and came away saying, "Naw, we're not having any of that, mate."

Woomera was not one of those bases that serve as a Little America. Most functions at Woomera were Australian: no US currency was used (not even in the APO), American children attended the local school, there was no US bank, no BX, no NCO or officers' club. Housing was Australian, electricity was 240 volts and Americans were given a transformer that worked with some, but not all, 110- volt appliances.

Dr. Julian Jones and the administrators who ran the Asian Division were wonderful in that they just left me to set up the program at Woomera. It was gratifying to have such trust. I was friendly with the Canberra bureaucrat who ran the town, and when I told him the University of Maryland would like to establish a program at Woomera he was so delighted that he turned over the former Commonwealth Bank office for me to use as an office and classroom. It was huge. I needed accommodation for the instructors, and he assigned the university a two-bedroom flat that was well beyond the studio apartment I dared hope for. I scrounged furniture for the flat and the office/classroom from the USAF and the Australian government, arranged for a sign painter to duplicate the University's logo on the window, and we were off and running!

(The huge office/classroom was later taken over by a USAF office, and I was left with a nice office in the front window. I relocated the classroom to the local school.)

During much of the time I worked for Maryland I also taught American History and Government at the local school. DoDDS provided funds to the school to hire American teachers for subjects that were not taught in Australian schools. I looked after the high school students, and another American teacher worked in the primary school. I was busy!

I loved working for Maryland! I enjoyed interacting with the instructors who came through. The USAF students were really motivated and charming.

Many of the instructors viewed Woomera, with a population of 2000 and seriously isolated, as a small respite from Asia. Cheese and other dairy products! Australian television! English language everywhere! Some were happy to be able to cook for themselves; others had no idea what to do in a kitchen as they were used to restaurants or at least the availability of a military mess. Australians who lived there had good paying jobs, and it was difficult to find services such as housekeeping and laundry. The Maryland flat was equipped with a washing machine, but clothes were dried outside where they wrinkled horribly in the unremitting sun.

Maryland provided a slush fund to purchase items, such as bedding, towels and small appliances for the flat. I realize that correlation is not causation, but after a time it appeared that most male instructors with a PhD after their name were somehow compelled to iron Styrofoam, and we went through several steam irons until I glumly realized I was going to have to give instructions on temperature settings. A few instructors unhappily struggled with the kitchen; one even managed to explode an electric oven!

What to do? I pointed at the charred wreckage, batted my eyes at the Aussie repairman, and said, "It's broken." He shrugged and grinned and returned to install a new stove. Really, Maryland should have paid for that, but I was pleased the issue was resolved smoothly.

The flat was an Aussie mid-century example of This is as Basic as It Gets, built of cement blocks topped with a tin roof, the kitchen cupboards shining with repeated coats of glossy paint and all horizontal surfaces coated, always, with a thin film of red dust. During this era, the Australian relationship with HVAC—heating, ventilation and air conditioning—was a mysterious one, the swamp coolers in the uninsulated residential buildings blasted a peculiar pong that was not deemed significant by local authorities. Many instructors passed their afternoons hanging around the Maryland office. I did not flatter myself to attribute their attention to my wit and good company. No, no, the Maryland office had real air conditioning!

Time for many who lived at Woomera spooled out endlessly. One of my most delightful instructors got hooked on Australian soap operas, an addiction I was unaware of in time to stage an intervention. He even returned for a second Australian tour, I think as much to catch up with his friends on "Neighbours" and "Home and Away." With a psychology instructor we passed the time drinking while interpreting the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Tests. He later offered to give us the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory for free! I am not entirely sure why I went along with this, but I enjoyed a vigorous debate over who was the

better US president, Washington or Lincoln, a question on the test that I refused to answer. From his scoring of the MMPI I learned that I am not a hypochondriac.

Australia is an ecological island and has strict rules around quarantine. For border agents, an overseas salami posts as great a danger as a zip-lock baggie filled with a recreational mood-enhancing white powder. Tourists visiting Australia can be asked to submit their hiking boots so the soles can be examined for dirt and potential vermin. It never occurred to me that a geology instructor would mail several boxes of his favorite rocks and fossils to the Maryland APO, thus providing the on-site Australian customs/quarantine official with more excitement than he'd had in a year! The box was released to the instructor, but I had some 'splainin' to do to the Aussie authority.

Maryland instructors are adventurous and adaptable. The more indefatigable instructors somehow got it into their heads that a side trip to Papua New Guinea would be the crown jewel in their southern hemisphere experience. PNG would be so exotic and authentic! The stories they could tell!

"No, no, no, you don't want to do that," I advised, but I got pushback. What does a little Field Rep know? "Look, ask every Australian you meet about a holiday in Papua New Guinea and in two weeks come back and tell me what you learned."

They shuffled into the Maryland office with a change of mind about PNG. Whew! Port Moresby was dangerous, and I did not have enough money in the slush fund to retrieve their limp, bloodied body to return to their relatives in the States.

Few of the roads in the area were sealed, that is, were blacktopped, and many were corrugated and dodgy to drive. Not only were the roads like a washboard, but the repeated grading to smooth the surface lowered the road a foot or so below the surrounding desert. Despite my suggestion that the trip could be fraught, one instructor was determined to drive up to Alice Springs. He hired a car, lost control on the bumpy surface, skidded into the side of the road, flipped and totaled his vehicle. He was really beat up from the accident and spent a few days nursing his wounds at the pub at Marla Bore while he waited for the bus back to Woomera. Good luck would have it that he was an anthropologist, and he later told me he enjoyed his time observing the comings and goings of the locals. His companion, the daughter of a well-known American television personality, was medevacked to the US. As far as I know, the incident stayed out of the press.

The only good news that came out of the accident was that I could be a bit more forceful in my suggestion that driving on unsealed roads was a bad idea.

The instructors who came through Woomera were lovely, fun, and interesting. A few incidents early in my tenure strengthened my backbone to wrangle the very few naughty instructors more competently. Consequently, the money spent on bailing out these guys (and there were many adventures that will go unspoken) was not completely spent, and Maryland would from

time to time send me more funds. Interest rates in the 1980s were as high as 18% in Australia, so I placed the University's funds in a high interest account in the local bank. Eventually, the administrators at Yokota asked for an accounting, and they were amazed and unhappy that the amount in the slush fund had actually increased!

Truly, I had no idea that Maryland funds were to be kept in a 0% interest account. I replied that I looked after the University's money as carefully as I would my own; consequently, it would have been barking mad not to take advantage of the excellent interest rates. I worried that I would be fired over this, but I was not.

I have many stories, and I could certainly give awards to *The Instructor Most Likely to Burn Down his Accommodation* and *The Instructor Most Likely to be Beaten Up by Somebody's Husband*, but I am afraid I cannot. Never tattle. Like in Las Vegas, "What goes on in Australia, stays in Australia."