The Antennas of Pine Gap

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THE ANTENNAS OF PINE GAP

Desmond Ball, Bill Robinson and Richard Tanter

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I. Introduction

Antennas are the most readily available and visible evidence of the existence, character, and size of signals intelligence facilities that operate or monitor space systems. Coupled with data on the timing of developments in US geosynchronous satellite programs, the timing of antenna installation now permits, for the first time, identification of the role and function of almost all antennas at Pine Gap. Documenting the development of the antenna systems of Pine Gap provides visual evidence of the profound changes in the base’s operations and its missions: a subject of political controversy in Australia for half a century. The antennas of Pine Gap are a powerful political symbol in Australia, representing either promise of enduring alliance protection or loss of national autonomy and nuclear threat to different audiences.

Since 1967, at least 46 antenna systems have been installed at Pine Gap, including 23 parabolic dish antennas covered by protective radomes and 23 uncovered antennas of assorted types. Four of those in radomes were subsequently dismantled (although three were replaced by other systems in radomes); nine without radomes also have been dismantled. Of the 33 antenna systems at the facility as of February 2016, 19 were in radomes and 14 were uncovered.

Authors

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Larger versions of all images will be available shortly on the main Pine Gap page on the Nautilus Institute Australian Defence Facilities website, at https://nautilus.org/publications/books/australian-forces-abroad/defence-facilities/, currently under reconstruction.

Very large file size versions of Laemmle-Ruff’s images are available through his website. Media requests for reproduction rights should be directed to that website. Felicity Ruby’s photographs are available through her website.

Note that the small spheres across the upper part of the cover image are lens flares, an artifact of the camera pointing directly at light sources at night.
Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the traditional owners and elders of the land on which the Pine Gap facility is located, and wish to express our gratitude for the kind assistance given to this project at an important point. We also thank Rosalie Schultz for assistance in fieldwork. We are deeply grateful to Felicity Ruby and Kristian Laemmle-Ruff, who very generously gave us permission to reproduce their photographs of Pine Gap. Luke Hambly from the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University kindly prepared the Figure 2. Philip Dorling kindly provided a government photograph to us. We are grateful to Rebecca Pollack at Nautilus Institute in Berkeley for patient and expert help with the preparation of this and other publications in this series.

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II. Special Report by Desmond Ball, Bill Robinson and Richard Tanter

The Antennas of Pine Gap

Report

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1. Introduction: Antennas of Pine Gap

Antennas are the most readily available and visible evidence of the existence, character, and size of signals intelligence facilities that operate or monitor space systems. Coupled with data on the timing of developments in US geosynchronous satellite programs, the timing of antenna installation now permits, for the first time, identification of the role and function of almost all antennas at Pine Gap. Documenting the development of the antenna systems of Pine Gap provides visual evidence of the profound changes in the base’s operations and its missions: a subject of political controversy in Australia for half a century. The antennas of Pine Gap are a powerful political symbol in Australia, representing either promise of enduring alliance protection or loss of national autonomy and nuclear threat to different audiences.

Since 1967, at least 46 antenna systems have been installed at Pine Gap, including 23 parabolic dish antennas covered by protective radomes and 23 uncovered antennas of assorted types. (See Table 1.) Four of those in radomes were subsequently dismantled (although three were replaced by other systems in radomes); nine without radomes also have been dismantled. Hence, of the 33 antenna systems at the facility as of February 2016, 19 were in radomes and 14 were uncovered (see Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2).

Most of these are still concerned with Pine Gap's core functions relating to geosynchronous SIGINT satellites - controlling the satellites, maintaining the boresights of the intercept antennas on the satellites, downlinking the intercepted data from the satellites, and sending both raw and processed data to an increasing number of users. (See Figure 3.)

Six of the satellite terminals now at Pine Gap (four in radomes and two unshielded) belong to the DSP/SBIRS Relay Ground Station (RGS), which relays early warning and missile tracking data downlinked from Defense Support Program (DSP) and Space Based Infrared System (SBIRS) satellites. Another three radomes are probably associated with the US Missile Defense Agency’s Space Tracking and Surveillance System (STSS) developmental satellites.

Pine Gap evidently acquired a foreign satellite/communication satellite (FORNSAT/COMSAT) interception mission around 1999-2000, with the arrival of elements of the National Security Agency’s (NSA’s) Service Cryptologic Agencies (SCAs) at the end of the 1990s. Two very suitable 23-metre dishes were installed inside 30-metre radomes in 1999-2000. A Torus multi-beam antenna for interception of secondary satellite communications, and capable of receiving in the order of a thousand communications channels simultaneously was installed in 2008.[1]

Some of the antenna systems were installed to facilitate Australian participation in Pine Gap’s activities, including two satellite dishes.radomes built in 1990-91 to provide the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) with direct access to SIGINT collected at the station.

2. Antenna identification system

One aim of this research is to identify all antenna systems installed at Pine Gap since 1967, with a view to then understand their characteristics and likely roles. There is no publicly available
information about the system by which the US government identifies antennas and other elements of Pine Gap infrastructure. Over a number of years, the authors have used different systems of antenna identification, each mainly based on the numerical order in which antennas were installed. As the number of antennas known to have been installed grew, and as more accurate information about the date of antenna installation was established (and on occasion revised more than once), it became clear that the identification of a particular antenna in a straightforward chronological system may need to be revised, sometimes more than once, leading to confusion. In Table 1, column 2, the authors introduce a year-based identification system.

The antennas are listed in chronological order, with some allowance for uncertainty in particular cases. The antenna identification number in column 2 is based on the year that the antenna was installed (see column 6), with a letter suffix further identifying it within the group installed that year. The first antenna listed, 67-A, was built in 1967, and it was the first (and only) antenna built that year. The second antenna listed, 68-A, was one of four installed in the following year. In cases of uncertainty, the best estimate is noted with a question mark. When an antenna is known to have been installed at some point during a specific period, the identification number is derived from the earliest possible year of construction in that range – e.g. antenna 86-A is known to have been installed between 1986 and 1988.

Figure 1. Antenna systems at Pine Gap, Google Earth imagery, 6 November 2015
Table 1. Antennas at Pine Gap

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors’ numbering system ID</th>
<th>Size (ft.) antenna/radome</th>
<th>Size (m.) antenna/radome</th>
<th>Coordinates</th>
<th>Built</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Radome</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>77-A</td>
<td>?/50</td>
<td>?/15</td>
<td>-23.798071°, 133.736247°</td>
<td>1977 Radome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>80-A</td>
<td>8/15</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>-23.798773°, 133.737046°</td>
<td>1980 Radome. 'Upgrade' in size of 69-B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98-A</td>
<td>52/10/16</td>
<td>-23.800425°, 33.732769°</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Radome. DSP/SBIRS.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98-B</td>
<td>52/10/16</td>
<td>-23.800811°, 33.732769°</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Radome. DSP/SBIRS.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site ID</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Latitude</td>
<td>Longitude</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 05-A</td>
<td>?/17</td>
<td>-23.799853°, 133.733103°</td>
<td>2005-2008?</td>
<td>Radome. STSS-related?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 05-B</td>
<td>?/17</td>
<td>-23.799856°, 133.733361°</td>
<td>2005-2008?</td>
<td>Radome. STSS-related?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Torus multiple-beam antenna.
FORNSAT/COMSAT collection role.

Radome.
Probably associated with the Orion-7 satellite.

No radome.
Installed on the site previously occupied by 89-A.

Radome.
STSS-related?

Radome.
DSP/SBIRS.

Radome.
SBIRS-related?

Table 2. Radomes and uncovered antennas at Pine Gap, 1970-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Radomes</th>
<th>Uncovered</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Number of antenna systems at Pine Gap, 1970-2015
Figure 3. Pine Gap signals intelligence compound, Here.com imagery, 2012
III. References


[2] The existence of Antenna 01-C is implied in the May 2002 Ministerial Statement that three uncovered antennas were installed between the 1999 official photograph (Figure 31) and May 2002.

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please send your response to: nautilus@nautilus.org.

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