

# In the Line of Fire

## A brief history of Talgarno at Anna Plains Station, WA.

by Andrew Saniga, The University of Melbourne, 2023.



The entry to Anna Plains Station homestead with signpost attached to one of the original telecommunications poles linked to the history of Talgarno. Photograph: Andrew Saniga, 2022.

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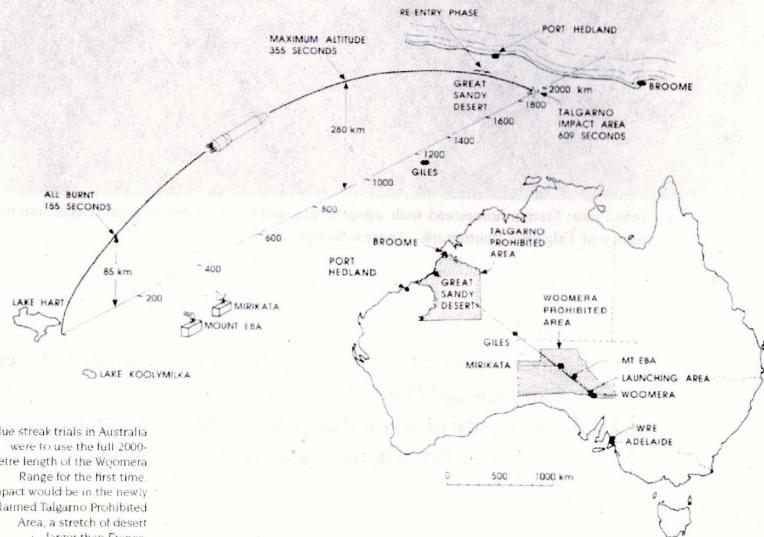
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## Background

Anna Plains Station once played host to a small settlement called 'Talgarno', a name purported to be an Aboriginal word meaning 'dry country' (language group unknown). Talgarno's existence was linked to the international role Australia played in the deepening of the Cold War from the 1950s.

The reason for Talgarno (built 1959-60) ultimately stemmed from events of the Second World War. As historian Peter Morton in *Fire Across the Desert* explained, Germany had shocked the world with its technologically advanced V2 long range missiles that had devastated London. Upon Germany's defeat, the allied forces scrambled to secure any left-over V2 missiles (along with the German engineers who designed them) so that they could develop their own version of the weapon. The allies realised the capacity of the V2 to deliver inter-continental nuclear war heads. The UK determined that Australia's expansive and relatively un-populated arid inland as a suitable location to test their version of the V2, which they called 'Blue Streak'.

The firing line and trajectory for Blue Streak and its inert war heads spanned some 2000 kilometres. It would be launched at the Weapons Research Establishment (WRE) at Woomera, SA and would 'land' inside the newly established Talgarno Prohibited Area (TPA) within the Great Sandy Desert. The TPA included Anna Plains Station along with four other pastoral stations with a total population in the late 1950s of around 200 people.



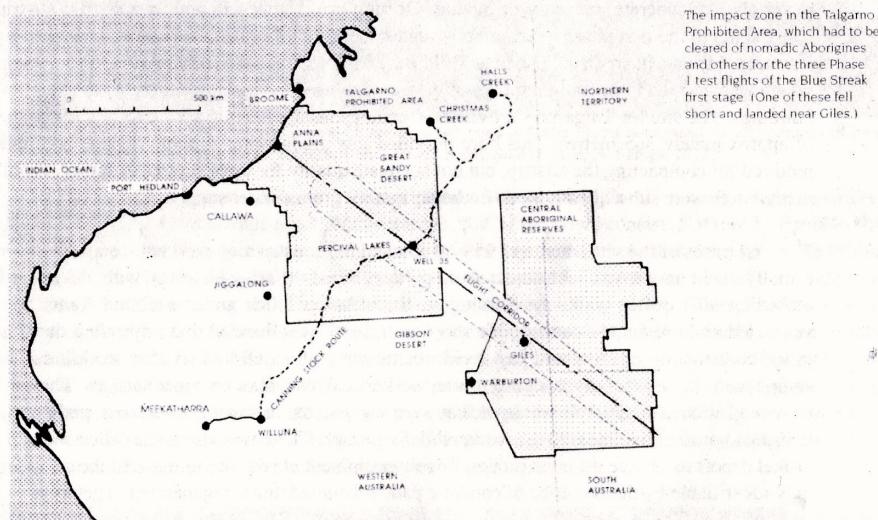
Source: Graphic and caption extract from Peter Morton, *Fire Across the Desert*, 1989, p. 442.

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## Talgarno's Rise and Fall

An essential role of the WRE was to test and develop Blue Streak's firing and launching procedures, including its flight behaviour over great distances. Talgarno was to be a permanent settlement of around 1000 workers whose job it would be to document and gauge the accuracy of Blue Streak in hitting targets within the primary impact zone as well as to collect the remains of spent missiles.

Back in the UK the costs of developing Blue Streak were escalating. It was realised that a fixed launching point for a long-range missile greatly increased its vulnerability which in turn required launchers to be built within defendable underground silos. These would be hugely expensive when built many times over and they would not have guaranteed the missiles' resilience to missile strikes from Russia. By the late 1950s when Australia was busily preparing its weapons-testing infrastructure, which included the establishment of the TPA and Talgarno, the program in the UK was in serious doubt. In March 1960 Prime Minister Robert Menzies received the news in-person – all expenditure on Blue Streak was to cease immediately, a 'bombshell' of an announcement.



Source: Graphic and caption extract from Peter Morton, *Fire Across the Desert*, 1989, p. 461.

Blue Streak's cancellation had serious ramifications. The scale of investment in Woomera and all its associated infrastructure across the continent had been enormous. Woomera had become one of the largest outdoor laboratories for rocketry and weapons-testing functions. A decision was made to repurpose Blue Streak rocket technology for the ELDO Europa mission, a program linked to the development of satellite technology. In the context of ELDO, the TPA would serve as an impact zone for spent first stage rocket components hundreds of kilometres south-east of the site of Talgarno and Anna Plains Station.

As a result, the single-purpose role of Talgarno as an observation post for Blue Streak's accuracy was obsolete. Talgarno's buildings that were under construction were seen through to completion then the entire site fenced and shut down as of 31 May 1960. The buildings were locked-up, the workers sent home, and the site became a ghost town literally overnight.

## Designing and Building Talgarno

Talgarno was designed early 1959 by the Perth office of the Commonwealth Department of Works (DoW). Construction commenced in the latter half of 1959 and was mostly built by the Geraldton Building Company (GBC). The project was led by Executive Engineer F.J. Buchanan along with a team of engineers, architects, quantity surveyors and draughtsmen. The site for Talgarno on land to be excised from Anna Plains Station was about 3 kilometres east of the homestead which at that time was occupied by station owner George Woodward (Woodie) Pearce (since 1956). Talgarno's remote location meant that the settlement needed to provide all essential services – airport, hospital, school, accommodation, mess halls and a range of recreational opportunities by way of playing courts, a swimming pool, etc. Only a fraction of what was initially planned was ever built.

As Buchanan explained, in 1959 the road connecting Port Hedland and Broome ran along the coastline just behind the dunes and was notorious for being impassable at certain times of year. There was little fresh water other than bored groundwater, and little in the way of building or construction materials like concrete, masonry or paving. Of high priority was a commercial-scale airstrip to be constructed in the first phase to ensure all-weather access to the site. Gravel for the airstrip's paving was scored from a quarry established at Mt Phire, 30 kilometres east of Talgarno. Mt Phire aggregate, which was deemed to be marginal in quality, was also used for making concrete associated with the buildings. The site for Talgarno sat over the Canning Basin, enabling a bore to be sunk to the depth of approximately 365 metres. This bore provided low grade water suitable for the large quantities required for compacting the airstrip, but not adequate quality for town supply. A series of shallow 30 metre bores were subsequently sunk for better quality groundwater supply.

The first traces of the settlement in 1959-60 entailed the construction workers' camp. The workforce initially lived in canvas tents erected atop 'duckboard' (timber-slating) with duckboard paths providing all-weather walkways leading to the ablution block and mess tent. Tents were well ventilated and reasonably comfortable short term, but it was deemed that improving the conditions in the construction camp would pay dividends in terms of a well looked-after workforce. Soon the camp received purposefully designed 4-man workers' cabins built atop concrete slabs. The cabins had flywire ventilated hatch-style windows that were also painted in an array of colours, perhaps intended to bring a sense of liveliness to the workers' daily routine. There was also a site office and workshops or fuel depots to service the construction force's equipment needs. The remains of the camp are today only identifiable by the presence of concrete pads subsumed under regenerated vegetation.



[left] Colourful workers' cabins in Talgarno's construction camp (1959) designed by Jack Ballenger and Dave Richards of the DoW; [right] aerial view of construction camp with sewerage plant lower right. Sources: F. J. Buchanan, *Talgarno Project*, unpublished manuscript, 15 March 1995; images from National Archives of Australia.

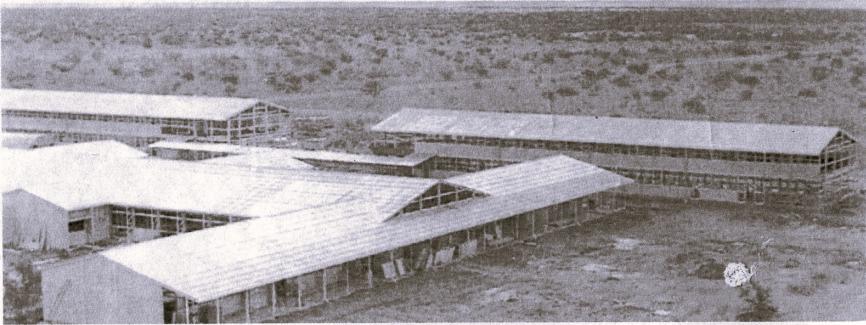


Blue Streak precipitated the building of a trans-continental telecommunications line linking Talgarno to Woomera. This was a big gain for WA infrastructure, and in particular the outback regions north of Meekatharra. Some of the telephone poles are still visible in and around Anna Plains homestead – a number were used as poles and joists for the awning at the rear of the original homestead.



[left] Remaining telecommunications pole on the approach road to Anna Plains homestead; [right] remains of power station building where four diesel generators once were housed. Source: Andrew Saniga, 2022.

The first stages of construction saw the completion of a set of 10 family houses, singles quarters, a mess building and a sewage plant. Water storages fed by the bores consisted of one 1.36 million litre steel plate circular on-ground tank (which was located adjacent the bore that today is the site of Anna Plains' 'Hot Tub') and a 136,000 litre (approx.) tank atop a 15-metre tower. One of the single living quarters buildings along with the water tank on the tower ended-up at the Willare Roadhouse where they both still exist today. Four 340kw diesel generating sets sourced from the UK were installed within a power station building alongside two diesel fuel storage tanks mounted within a concreted bund. Upon being commissioned the generators produced too much power for the meagre construction camp at that time so a temporary portable generator was sourced. Talgarno's impressive power station was never used at Talgarno: the four generators, and possibly the building as well, were transported for re-use at the United States Navy base in Exmouth.



The mess building in the foreground and the two singles quarters buildings at the rear. One of the singles quarters buildings was repurposed to become the Willare Roadhouse. Source: Morton, *Fire Across the Desert*, 1989, p. 443.

The cluster of family houses were designed to be cyclone resistant. They had steel frames and were raised off the ground. Each had a solar hot water supply, technology that had only recently become available in Australia – another indication of the importance of Blue Streak and of how no expense was spared in the construction of Talgarno. The solar worked too well: combined with the latent heat of the bore water there was an inability to cool-down the hot water sufficiently. There were additional teething problems: had Talgarno's life been long, the piping for these hot water services would have been problematic due to chemical reactivity from minerals in the bore water. Upon Talgarno's decommissioning, these family houses were transported to Exmouth and Derby and possibly elsewhere.



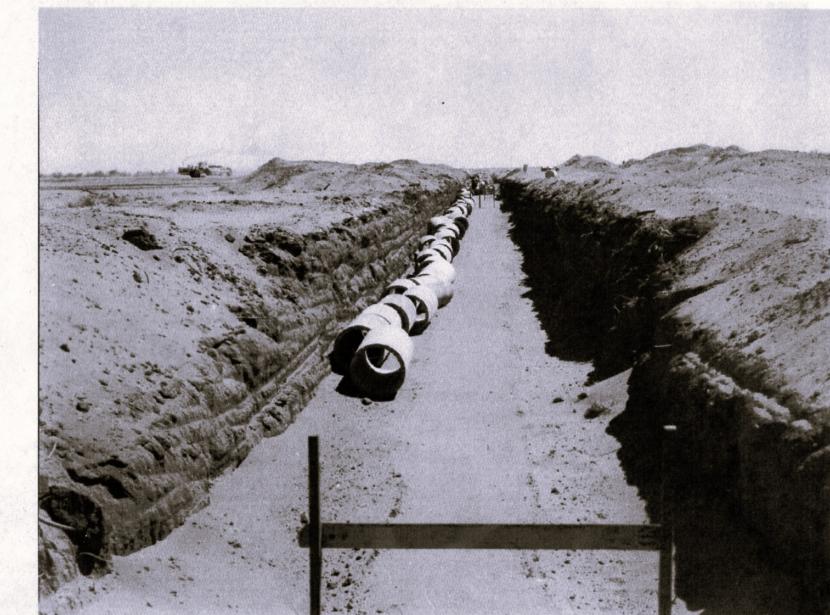
The cluster of family homes and one revealing its solar hot water system on tower. Source: National Archives of Australia.

The air-conditioned mess had an enormous bar within the main mess building – the bar was reputedly one of the largest in regional WA. The mess was designed with the ranks of officers and high-powered UK Public Service staff in mind. No expense was spared on the kitchen, freezing facilities, dining areas, and of course, the bar. The opening of the mess in 1960 for the first time coincided with the 'celebration' of the cancellation of Blue Streak. And what a way to go out! As Talgarno's project engineer F.J. Buchanan in 1995 recalled:

Special foods [crays] had been flown in in Bert's plane and the grog flowed from the canteen. The dining room was christened and the longest bar in Australia tested for every inch of its length... [however, upon reflection]... The whole project is probably best summed up as much to do about nothing, achieved nothing and returned nothing.



[left] Remains of the Talgarno mess; [right] remains of the concrete pads to which the steel structural supports of the family homes and their solar hot water systems affixed to steel towers. Source: Andrew Saniga, 2022.



[above] Drainage lines being installed to the airstrip with leveling machinery at work in top left of image; [below] on ground water tank under construction with bore to right. Source: National Archives of Australia.

