



Hippocampus whitei

SYDNEY HARBOUR ASSOCIATION

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**Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works -
Submission: HMAS WATSON Redevelopment Project**

Committee Secretary
Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Overview

1. The Defence *Statement of Evidence* to the Inquiry presents a large and costly but specifically *local* proposal in isolation from the larger Naval and Harbour context in which it is intended to take place.
2. Although the activities currently undertaken and envisaged at HMAS WATSON are all land-based, the local site area and other limitations are noted in the defence *Statement of Evidence* but accepted without demur. The use of alternative sites for some or all activities is dismissed without discussion.
3. The proposal was developed in the absence of contemporary inputs of local community experience relating to HMAS WATSON operations over past years. The surrounding community was not informed of the project or invited to comment until September 2019, after the detail of the proposal had been developed and submitted to the Minister and the Committee.
4. This submission from Sydney Harbour Association requests the Committee to inquire into and report on the appropriateness of the siting and capability assumptions underlying the proposal having specific regard to the inherent limitations of the site and to the longer-term vision for Sydney Harbour that has been adopted by the NSW Government in its *Sydney Regional Environmental Plan (Sydney Harbour Catchment) 2005 (SREP)*.
5. The submission recommends that the proposal not proceed unless and until the issues arising from that analysis have been addressed by Defence and exhibited to the public.

Identification

6. Sydney Harbour Association was established in 2010, as successor body to Sydney Harbour and Foreshores Committee (est. 1979). The Association is an unincorporated body of individuals interested in Sydney Harbour. In concert with the stated policy of the NSW Government, the Association is concerned at all times to ensure that the catchment, foreshores, waterways and islands of Sydney Harbour are recognised, protected, enhanced and maintained

- (i) as an outstanding natural asset, and
 - (ii) as a public asset of national and heritage significance,
- for existing and future generations.

7. This submission complements and explains the preliminary submission lodged with Defence Staff present at the community information session held at Watsons Bay on 12 October 2019 by the present author.

Project rationale

8. As advised in its circular *Notice of Community Information Sessions*, distributed to the Watsons Bay community by Defence in October,

...The aim of the proposed works is to upgrade facilities and infrastructure on the site to allow desired training and capability outcomes to be achieved. This work will ensure that the site is fit for purpose and can continue existing as the Navy's principal training establishment.

9. In view of the scale of the project, and its \$ 400+ million cost estimate, our Association requests the Committee to address directly and meticulously the fundamental issues underlying the proposed retention of the complete range of activities currently undertaken at South Head.

10. Some elements of the Committee's *terms of reference* are particularly apposite to that consideration and to the present Inquiry. In particular, they relate to *...the necessity for, or advisability of, carrying out the work* (PWC Act 1969, S.17(3)(b), and *...the present and prospective public value of the work* (S.17(3)(e)).

11. Those headings raise critical issues that do not appear to be adequately addressed in the *Defence Statement of Evidence* to the Inquiry. There is no self-evident reason why the present site should continue to be used to constitute the Navy's principal training establishment. Successive alterations and additions to the constituent elements of the training regime activities and structures on-site have provided only temporary up-dates rather than lasting assurance of fit-for-purpose facilities.

12. Proposed reversal of past changes to on-site activity locations and past and proposed demolition of on-site structures of varying ages illustrate clearly the practical reality that flexibility is a useful aspect in dealing with an uncertain future, but there is very little flexibility inherent in the close confines of the HMAS WATSON site. The *Defence Statement*

of Evidence clearly recognises (at para.22) that the HMAS WATSON redevelopment is *restricted by space*, but it offers no insights into benefits that might be realised as a result of its adherence to the site.

13. Seemingly unfazed by that restriction, the focus of the project components and of their analysis in the *Defence Statement of Evidence* is exclusively directed to the South Head site. It is presented in a kind of large-scale decision-making vacuum, because it responds to the specifications and requirements of the present occupants of the site and their presently expected activities rather than a comprehensive view of likely defence strategic needs. Instead, Defence summarily dismisses potential re-location options (in para. 7 of its *Statement of Evidence*) on a whole or partial basis without displaying supporting detail.

14. For that reason among others, careful and detailed analysis to establish whether and why the present site might be deemed to be appropriate now and in the future for its current and likely future menu of purposes in the modern era of electronic communications and defence strategies is clearly warranted. We request the Committee to include such an analysis in its report to Parliament.

15, Aspects of immediate relevance in such an analysis include consideration of the reality of the stringent physical area limitations and geological and topographic challenges of the site, and their impact on access of all kinds. In today's world, there is no readily discernible physical reason for maintaining the South Head site for naval purposes anyway.

16. South Head has topographical, geological, and area constraints and neighbourhood features which restrict its potential continuing relevance to maritime training in the modern world and offer no apparent advantages other than the (necessarily expensive) retention of entrenched and partly out-dated capital. These issues require careful assessment, especially in relation to their inherent tendency to inflate construction costs and restrict operational options. We request the Committee to provide such an assessment.

17. Proximity to and impact on the community living below and affected directly by activity on the Base and on the natural environment immediately bounding the site and on the Harbour generally also requires more than simple fixes for current irritations, well-intentioned though they may be. The site characteristics merit more comprehensive and insightful consideration than is apparent in the *Defence Statement of Evidence* assessment of the project.

Harbour-specific issues

18. Regrettably, the *Defence Statement of Evidence* makes no reference to the stated policy of the NSW Government for Sydney Harbour, as set out in *Sydney Regional Environmental Plan (Sydney Harbour Catchment) 2005* (SREP). Clause 2: Aims of the SREP states:

2. Aims: (1)(a)..... *to ensure that the catchment, foreshores, waterways and islands of Sydney Harbour are recognised, protected, enhanced and maintained*
(i) *as an outstanding natural asset, and*
(ii) *as a public asset of national and heritage significance,*
for existing and future generations.

19. That omission constitutes an important aspect of the failure to provide a broad context in the Defence *Statement of Evidence* for the proposed works. Sydney Harbour is not merely a suburban and locally-appreciated waterbody; it is world-renowned. The impact of activities located about its foreshores has a direct bearing on its environment.

20. Persistence with activities and developments that do not require a Harbour-side location only reduces the possibilities of ameliorating the damage done in past times. With modern technology, the kinds of training activities undertaken at HMAS WATSON do not need or even relate to the close proximity of a real waterbody. There is no obvious public benefit in retention of the Harbour-side siting of the Base for the present purposes.

21. Logically, there may well be better options available for siting some, or many, or all of the current HMAS WATSON facilities in one or more locations elsewhere. In a project of this magnitude, those options deserve both rigorous exploration and public civic exposition. The Committee's report to Parliament could provide such advice; we request that it do so.

22. The significance of South Head for active naval operations is wholly confined to land-based activities. A rigorous analysis of the kind reasonably associated with public works of this high cost should incorporate consideration of alternative sites having fewer locational disadvantages and/or identifiable positive advantages for those activities. Other important aspects should include the identification of any beneficial outcomes that would arise from the establishment of joint facilities and/or collaboration with other Navy establishments at their present or entirely new sites.

23. An outstanding omission in the presentation of and justification for the project lies in the proposed retrospective re-location of the helipad from its present location to the Wilson Field. The proposal is highly objectionable locally on the grounds that originally led to its removal from Wilson Field to its present position. It lacks explanation other than that which is implicit in the Defence proposal to build over the site of the present helipad. We request the Committee to obtain and report whatever relevant matter bears on this vexed subject.

24. Except in emergencies, helicopters should not be overflying the old, fragile, historic and closely-developed residential Camp Cove precinct. That they have caused real distress and damage in the past seems to have been overlooked, presumably reflecting the absence of earlier consultation in the local community. Obviously, the past history of the matter has either been ignored or written off as irrelevant in the development of the current return proposal; the reasoning for reversion to Wilson Field given in the Defence *Statement of Evidence* only relates to the positioning of new buildings on the present helipad site.

25. The high incidence of suicide at and around the cliffs of South Head/Watsons Bay may be thought to imply an ongoing demand for helicopter access in the general vicinity. In some circumstances, a helipad location at HMAS WATSON could assist aid/recovery activity related to suicide anywhere along the cliff-side. But it is not the only or necessarily the best location for that purpose. Having regard to the extent of the rugged cliffs of the coastline of

the Watsons Bay/Vaucluse/Dover Heights district, and the nature and ground-level accessibility of areas of flat open recreational space adjoining them, a helipad at Wilson Field has no self-evident locational merit in the cliff rescue context; there are similarly positioned and - depending on the specific incident - perhaps more relevantly located sites for emergency landing/pick-up use elsewhere along the cliff-side. Anyway, the suicide issue is not mentioned in the Defence *Statement of Evidence*.

26. We appreciate that there has been an occasional operational need to use Wilson Field as an alternative helipad for HMAS WATSON when atmospheric conditions required it. Early and informed consideration of this issue for the present project could well have led to a different disposition of buildings and/or design modifications that would accommodate a helipad for routine use on-site at HMAS WATSON without reverting to the Wilson Field or the Camp Cove precinct environs. Even at this late stage, it remains theoretically possible to make building design/placement changes to meet that objective.

27. Cost increments related to that kind of exercise in project revision could and should be viewed as the outcome of premature project design undertaken in the absence of information about, appreciation of and allowance for local experience.

Aspects of security

28. Emphasis on security at HMAS WATSON is (justifiably) prominent in the Defence *Statement of Evidence*. We note as a matter of potential relevance to the Inquiry that the undeniable quality of the South Head public lands has prompted some vigorously promoted development proposals for commercial uses of legacy Defence buildings and land in the South Head sector of Sydney Harbour National Park. The most recent of them, reportedly involving among other things an elevated overhead walkway near Lady Bay, looks to utilise various buildings and components of the Park and claims to be justified on the basis of enabling access for disabled visitors. In principle, it would effectively alienate part of the Park for private commerce.

29. The Committee should be aware that the National Park lands that surround HMAS WATSON comprise former Defence lands that were ceded by the Commonwealth to NSW with a view to them being dedicated specifically for National Park purposes. Entertainment by the NSW Government and its agencies of proposals for development for private commerce is therefore inconsistent with the terms of the agreement under which the lands were ceded, and unacceptable to our Association and to the local community.

30. If accepted, there are clear inferences about security at HMAS WATSON to be derived from those kinds of proposals, especially when night-time social events comprise part of the menu. If Navy is determined to remain at South Head and if it does indeed do so, Defence and the Committee and the Australian Parliament would do well to make unmistakably clear to the NSW Government and its relevant agencies these kinds of concerns about maintenance of site integrity and consistency with the original land transfer arrangement.

Consultation schedule

31. The foregoing remarks respond to the Defence *Statement of Evidence* to the Committee and to material presented at the Community Information Sessions held at Watsons Bay on 10 and 12 October 2019, following advice of the project given by Defence to the Watsons Bay Association and conveyed by that Association to us on 23 September. We had no earlier advice of it.

32. The planning, specification, costing and potential timing of the project described in the Defence *Statement of Evidence* were therefore far advanced before we and the Watsons Bay community became aware of them. Accordingly, we note with regret that the project has been developed to date without input from its nearest neighbours and without the direct canvassing of contemporary local issues. Of specific significance to our own Association is the similar absence of prior consultation related to the wider scale of Sydney Harbour, in which HMAS WATSON and its affiliated naval establishments are prominent land-users.

33. We were advised by Defence that Parliamentary approval of the project would enable a speedy commencement of work having regard to its already detailed specifications. This raises serious concerns as to whether constructive comment made now which involves substantive alteration to any of the project design or activity components would simply be futile. Any change at all would obviously affect the cost of materials/labour/other construction estimates directly as quantities, qualities, and technologies would change over time.

34. At this very late stage, resistance to real change in the project detail would be understandable. Even so, we hope the Committee will not adopt such a view in its report to Parliament.

Hylde Rolfe, Secretary,
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16 October 2019.