

HMAS WATSON REDEVELOPMENT

The planned redevelopment of the RAN training facility at South Head raises the recurring question: “*Why are they here?*” The enquiry provides an opportunity to test the rationale for maintaining what is essentially a “portable” facility at a valuable harbourside site, embedded in a precious national park.

The longstanding Defence presence at South Head is centred on artillery emplacements to protect Australia from Russians, French, Japanese and other potential invaders. The RAN has occupied the site since 1945.

Surely, this presents an appropriate time to divest the South Head operation and move it to a location that is not only more relevant – for example, Northern Australia – or outer Western Sydney.

The Scope of Works before the Committee involves the Navy ‘digging in’ at a cost of half a billion dollars to ensure it retains its presence in arguably the most valued and desirable site in Sydney Harbour. Its comfortable and scenic location has always been highly prized by RAN staff.

But it is not expandable. Is this a sensible long-term strategy?

Defence notes, without any supporting evidence: “*Defence assessed the future of HMAS Watson, including potential relocation options. It was concluded that there would be no benefit in closing the Base and relocating its functions to other existing Defence sites*”

The logistics of undertaking the proposed redevelopment are daunting. Creating an ‘embedded’ four storey building on the crest of South Head involves the removal of many tonnes of digger-resistant Hawkesbury sandstone. Access by heavy construction equipment and trucks is via one winding, narrow, congested road, presenting hazards over a sustained period. There are several certified dangerous intersections on this route. The area is heavily trafficked by tourists, both on foot and car and the prospect of a five-year project involving so much heavy plant movements is daunting. Meanwhile visitor numbers to the area are growing.

Defence is seeking to use the adjacent Gap Bluff national park as a parking lot for heavy construction plant, effectively closing to the public one of urban Sydney’s precious national parks for five years and destroying the amenity of one of Sydney’s most popular walking trails, a critical segment of the soon-to-be-launched *Bondi to Manly* walking trail.

This leaves Navy with their least desirable option of using the base recreational field as a parking lot.

It is difficult to imagine a more problematic site to undertake public works of this magnitude.

The Defence submission to the committee casually dismisses many of these issues. For example: “*Traffic will increase during construction; however, the impacts are considered to be temporary.*”¹

The Defence submission addresses other elements in a similar cursory fashion. The report lacks both reasoning and supporting data to support a public project of this magnitude.

Redevelopment of the site challenges the expertise of any contractor, and relocating to a greenfield site is an arguably much superior outcome. If this option is not within the purview of the Committee it could, at the

¹ HMAS Watson Redevelopment Project Submission Page 25.



least, result in a recommendation to Parliament to move the training base to a more amenable, expandable and sustainable location.

Arguments for retaining the base on South Head include:

- *Integration of sailor training with other RAN operations in Sydney Harbour.*
- *Adding to already-invested facilities on a highly desirable site.*

It is difficult to cite other sound reasons for the ongoing occupation of the iconic South Head site.

The Chief of Navy now (understandably) maintains his permanent residence at the base in one of the heritage harbour-view cottages.

Training Australia's sailors could most sensibly be executed at another site. Sydney would not suffer and would in fact benefit from increased tourist visitation to a premier and contiguous national park on South Head. Moving the RAN training facility to a regional centre would provide a massive injection to the economies of many drought-affected centres. Sydney would not suffer.

The RAN imperative is to integrate their training operation with Garden Island and other Sydney RAN harbourside facilities; this could also be achieved with a location in outer Sydney. The Defence submission does not provide any reasoning why this integration is mission-critical.

The rationale for this project strangely asserts a static throughput of trainees. In the event of a major threat, the RAN may need to instantly double their training volume. The limited dimensions of the site could not cope with the demands of this (not unlikely) scenario.

Australians and especially Sydneysiders, would benefit by this valuable site being ceded to the NSW Government to be absorbed in the South Head National Park, as happened in 1989, when Defence (Army) transferred its historic artillery base holdings to the NSW Government, endowed as a major contribution to NSW's national park inventory. It is time for the RAN to do the same in the broadest national interest and create an expandable training base in a more sensible location.

An increasing concentration of major Navy facilities on central sites in Sydney Harbour also raises the issue of Sydney becoming a primary target in the event of Australia facing hostile threats. Hugh White, in his recent book "*How to Defend Australia*" stressed that the threat of a direct attack on Australia is already much higher than a decade or two ago.²

It is time to do the right thing, for the benefit of all Australians, and restore South Head to a NSW national park. Visitors should be able to enjoy unrestricted access to South Head, not be faced with a massive and concentrated development with enhanced razor wire fences to protect a training base that could be located at any number of more appropriate and welcoming sites.

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² "How to Defend Australia" - Hugh White - 2019. LaTrobe University Press

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