



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

Supplementary submission: HMAS WATSON Redevelopment Project

I offer some observations on the remarks in the Defence Supplementary Submission relating to the helipad at HMAS WATSON. I record that I am one of the property-owners affected.

In addition to my formal capacity as Secretary of Sydney Harbour Association, I described myself as a Camp Cove resident at the Committee's public hearing so that the Committee might understand that, having lived at Camp Cove for some 50 years, I might be able to offer some insights into helicopter operations and associated issues that may otherwise have escaped attention.

In the past, the Wilson Field location of the helipad affected principally those people residing close to it – that is, in the Camp Cove Precinct of Watsons Bay. Primarily, they were residents of Cliff Street and Cove Street, which are the two streets nearest to the Base. Those streets in turn were and remain the location of some of the oldest and most fragile of the original cottages for which Watsons Bay has become a tourist focus.

Built by standards not conforming to those of today, often sited on land with a high water table owing to its original sandhill/tidal lagoon/swamp nature and accordingly vulnerable to vibration, the few original timber houses remaining are not very robust, and certainly do not have the stability of modern structures.

The downwash of low-level helicopters overflying them has the effect of generating shuddering and associated concern to people inside the relevant houses. It was those kinds of concerns articulated to the (then) personnel at the Base that led to removal of the helipad away from the Wilson Field in the first place.

Generally speaking, Watsons Bay people are well-accustomed to helicopter activity related not only to HMAS WATSON, but also to the numerous transits of the Harbour of other aircraft including seaplanes and – importantly – to the emergency and rescue operations that so frequently occur along the eastern ocean cliff. Residents of the Camp Cove Precinct share those experiences, and accept them in the same way as they have accepted the occasional use of the Wilson Field as a helipad for the HMAS WATSON Christmas function, and for operational purposes when atmospheric conditions required it.

It is therefore by no means surprising that Watsons Bay visitors to the public consultation sessions at Watsons Bay Hotel did not recall any specific mental notation of flights from/to HMAS WATSON in the recent past. They are a normal feature of life, and – to the extent that the flights occur during working/commuting/shopping/school hours when most people are away from home – simply cannot be experienced, so they are not memorable anyway.

The return of the helipad to Wilson Field as now proposed by Defence is therefore of primary and direct concern only to a relatively few people and a few (arguably irreplaceable) properties.

Lacking any reference to or recognition of the reasons underlying the original decision to move the helipad to its present location, the Defence submissions to the Committee offer no ground for optimism on the part of the affected Camp Cove precinct residents. That is regrettable.

Redesign of the project could resolve the issue. Our submission to the Committee's public hearing included this view:

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.

Our Association's Committee has again endorsed that statement in light of the helipad matter.

Hylde Rolfe, Secretary, Sydney Harbour Association

12 November 2019