

Issues and Conclusions

Site Considerations

Site Selection

- 3.1 The site of Holsworthy for the location of the 171st Aviation Squadron was determined by operational and financial factors. Special Operations Command is located at Holsworthy because of its central location on the eastern seaboard.¹ Defence explained to the Committee that the location of a squadron of helicopters in the Sydney region enabled training to be conducted in conjunction with the Special Forces. The collocation also improved safety as helicopters would be continuously available for training exercises without having to be moved from Townsville for single deployments. This met a key recommendation from the investigation into the 1996 Black Hawk crash.² The inquiry recommended specifically that:

Dedicated Army aviation assets be allocated in support of counter terrorist and special operations capability and that

1 Appendix D, op. cit., page 4

2 *ibid.*, page 3.

the units be collocated during training, planning and the conduct of operations.³

- 3.2 Defence further explained that the cost of a helicopter's operation was \$20,000 per hour, making the cost of transit from Townsville to Sydney, a journey which took a number of hours, expensive. Collocation allowed considerable savings in this area alone. Alternative sites were considered and discarded. Both Williamtown and Richmond would have required the helicopters to traverse Sydney to provide support to the Special Forces and Nowra, somewhat distant from Sydney, would have added a \$10 million premium to the operational costs.⁴

Timing of Relocation

- 3.3 The Committee expressed concern that the relocation had taken 10 years from the time of the recommendation in the Black Hawk inquiry. Defence responded that there had been 'real reticence to split the aviation capability' based on the size of the squadron and the technical, trade capabilities needed to support it. Only when the squadron reached a critical mass with the announcement of an additional 12 helicopters was the decision made that the split would be sustainable.⁵ Moving a capability permanently also involved the movement and relocation of families, something Defence did not want to do without sufficient preparation for the housing of families.⁶

Base Population

- 3.4 With the relocation of 171st Aviation to Holsworthy, the base population will increase by 200 personnel.

Interim Facilities

- 3.5 Personnel will be moved to Holsworthy in January 2007. The expected completion date of the general works is mid-2008. Interim works are to be built to cover the 18 month period before all works are finished. Members asked Defence why the interim works were

3 *ibid.*, page 4.

4 *ibid.*, page 3.

5 *ibid.*, page 5.

6 *ibid.*, page 6.

necessary and whether it would not be possible to synchronise the completion of the works with the relocation.

- 3.6 Defence responded that it was a Government decision, post 11 September 2001, to improve the counter terrorism capability as quickly as possible. That decision had impelled the permanent relocation of the helicopter support for the Special Operations Command as early as the Defence forces could feasibly manage the transfers.
- 3.7 Part of the interim facilities, the deployable shelters, will be re-usable when the unit is deployed elsewhere in Australia or overseas.⁷

Environmental Impacts

Hazardous Materials

- 3.8 The Committee asked, given the vintage of the buildings, whether there was a problem with asbestos. Defence said that they had conducted surveys and there was asbestos present. It had been factored into the contracts. It would be removed, or, if it was in a stable, bonded form, as most of the asbestos at Holsworthy was, efforts would be made to ensure that no occupation was endangered. Tradesmen would be made fully aware of its existence and 'work would be carried out in accordance with the code'.⁸
- 3.9 Questions were also asked about the extent to which the corrosion control facility would be self-contained to ensure that chemicals used in the treatment of aircraft did not leach into the surrounding soil or water. Defence explained that lessons had been learned from the experience in Townsville. At Holsworthy, there would be a closed system so that 'run off from the washing operation goes through a separate filter, ... [and] we are investigating whether we can reuse the water.'⁹

7 *ibid.*, page 13.

8 *ibid.*, page 7.

9 *ibid.*, page 8.

Bushfire Dangers

- 3.10 The Sutherland Shire Council raised some concern about the incapacity of Holsworthy to take preventative action against bushfires, such as back burning, because of unexploded ordnance.

Because of the unexploded ordnance ... and because of the topography, you get strong westerly winds coming across the plain. A fire builds up an incredible head of steam at which time it then crosses Heathcote Road and hits shire residents.¹⁰

- 3.11 Defence responded that the Holsworthy base maintains a first response fire fighting capability. In addition, there was a controlled plan by which the New South Wales and local bushfire brigades were allowed to the base in order to fight fires. Some restrictions were maintained for the safety of the fire fighters.¹¹

Noise Levels

- 3.12 A further issue raised by the Sutherland Shire Council related to the impact of aircraft noise. The Committee asked Defence whether the relocation affected the frequency of air movements on the base and what effect the noise levels generated by such movements had on the surrounding communities. The Committee noted that there had been correspondence on this matter with the Sutherland Shire Council.

- 3.13 Defence explained that they had applied the Australian Noise Exposure Forecast (ANEF) and the Australian Noise Exposure Concept (ANEC) to the question. This was a computer modelling system which provided a forecast of likely aircraft noise over a period of time, perhaps 10 or 20 years. This in turn created a primary document for planning purposes which met the Australian Standard 2021 covering aircraft noise intrusion, building siting and construction.¹² Ideally, noise would be kept within certain contours, ANEF 20, on a diagram developed from the model.

- 3.14 The result of this work in relation to Holsworthy was:

The ANEF 20 that is generated by these helicopter operations that we are proposing is all contained within the base boundary except for one small section on the lower right

10 *ibid.*, page 21..

11 *ibid.*, page 38.

12 *ibid.*, page 8.

hand side, where it goes outside the range boundary but is still within the military controlled airspace. That is also national park – there is no housing in that vicinity. No citizen should experience planning controls when trying to submit a building application or the like resulting from aircraft noise generated by 171 Aviation Squadron.¹³

- 3.15 Defence did agree, however, that should Councils approve developments that encroached on the boundary of the base then such developments will be affected by noise. This noise will remain below the ANEF 20, that is, noise below the critical level; however, some noise below this level will be heard on the boundaries of the range. To this extent Defence had written to Councils expressing concern about Council approvals for development which encroached on the boundaries of the base.¹⁴
- 3.16 Members also asked whether the frequency of air movements affected the level of noise and whether Defence considered this in their assessment of the impact of the relocation.
- 3.17 Defence reported that there were limitations on the use of aircraft. Training hours were affected by the aircraft and pilot availability. Movements would be less than domestic aircraft and the general entrance and egress would be to the south over the less populated areas. In particular, the number of movements over the northern, more populated egress routes was estimated to be one in every 18 days.¹⁵

Native Fauna

- 3.18 Defence was conducting an environmental impact study to determine the impact of the works on the flora and fauna. The initial assessment was that flying helicopters over the area did not have a significant impact on birds or bats.¹⁶ Nor did Defence believe that bird or bat strike would create problems for aircraft.

In five years of flying out of Luscombe field, which has involved some 3,000 flight hours in Black Hawks, there has never been any bat or bird strike in this area at all. ... Since

13 *ibid.*, page 9.

14 *ibid.*, page 12.

15 *ibid.*, page 10.

16 *ibid.*, page 6.

1988, ... we have flown over 110,000 hours around Australia and the world and there have been only 38 incidents of bats or birds impacting a Black Hawk at all. Of those, none has caused damage to engines or rotors [or] has caused the helicopters to be in any dangerous situation.¹⁷

Creation of Wetlands

- 3.19 Defence did not believe that the local wetlands increased the vulnerability of the aircraft. Many airports had adjacent wetlands and it appeared that birds stayed away from the vibrations of aircraft.¹⁸

Energy Efficiency

- 3.20 In the project, Defence is aiming to achieve an energy rating of 4.5 on the Australian Greenhouse rating scale, the Australian Building Greenhouse Rating (ABGR).¹⁹ This would apply to office accommodation and new buildings only, not to workshops. Defence informed the Committee that no tools were yet available for rating workshops.²⁰
- 3.21 In its submission Defence described a number of systems that they would incorporate into the design of the project to improve energy consumption:

The design of all power supply, electrical and mechanical equipment will include an assessment of energy use, applying life-cycle costing techniques and power demand analysis ...

Lighting is to be controlled, where possible, by photoelectric switches in conjunction with time switch schedules, ... personal sensor controlled lighting, ... high efficiency fluorescent lamps [and] time switches at air conditioner controls.²¹

17 *ibid.*, page 6.

18 *ibid.*, page 7.

19 Appendix C, *op. cit.*, paragraph 61.

20 Appendix D, *op. cit.*, page 14.

21 Appendix C, *op. cit.*, paragraphs 57 and 59.

Heritage Implications

- 3.22 The Defence submission stated that there were no heritage issues in relation to the proposal and that this had been accepted by the Department of Environment and Heritage.²²
- 3.23 In its submission, Defence also stated that there were no Native Title claims over the proposed works sites and no known indigenous sites were affected by the project.²³
- 3.24 Two Aboriginal groups, the Cubbitch Barta Native Title Claimants Aboriginal Corporation and the Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council, gave evidence to the Committee. The Land Council spokesman explained that under the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Rights Act cultural heritage matters were part of the core business of the Council. The Council had 700 members, consulted widely and formed partnerships with other organisations.
- 3.25 Mrs Chalker, from the Cubbitch Barta Native Title Claimants Aboriginal Corporation, agreed that there was no native title claim over the Holsworthy site.²⁴
- 3.26 However, both groups before the Committee expressed concerns about the possible impact of the proposed changes to the operations of the base on aboriginal sites. The area had been partially surveyed as part of the EIS conducted in 1997 in respect of the proposed airport at Badgerys Creek. The Holsworthy area was then listed as part of the national estate in 1998.²⁵ However, both groups put the view that their survey had been incomplete, conducted in haste over a period of seven weeks and covering only one third of an area of 19,000 hectares. They had discovered 3,000 sites in that time including rock carvings and rock paintings.²⁶ They believed that there were potentially other sites. They asked for some access to conduct further surveys and for their concerns to be taken seriously.²⁷
- 3.27 The Land Council noted that the military had been good custodians of the land; 90 per cent of the sites had not been impacted upon,

22 *ibid.*, paragraph 79.

23 *ibid.*, paragraph 80.

24 Appendix D, *op. cit.*, page 18.

25 *ibid.*, page 16.

26 *ibid.*, page 17.

27 *ibid.*, page 26.

protected by being locked up for a long time as military land.²⁸ Their concern was that two new ranges were to be built, usage was to be increased and a private company, not the Defence Department, was to be responsible for the maintenance of the range.²⁹

3.28 In addition, the Committee asked Defence about the proposed level of consultation with local Aboriginal groups. In particular, the Chair asked whether Defence would consider employing a cultural heritage specialist from the local Aboriginal Community as a site monitor as the work continues.

3.29 Defence argued that an environmental consultant had been employed to produce

an open, transparent and comprehensive public environmental report. ... As part of the development of that report, we have obviously asked our consultants to look at the Aboriginal cultural heritage issues.³⁰

And

We do not have any project allowance in the budget for the employment of an Aboriginal heritage specialist.

And

We need to try to separate the broader Aboriginal community concern for the range from the project specific stuff ... the great bulk of all the sites we are talking about are beyond the areas we are dealing with. We have a bit of work to do to sort that out, particularly on the boundaries.

3.30 Finally Brigadier Hutchinson sought to reassure the Aboriginal groups present that Defence was passionate about its caretaking responsibilities,³¹ that it would not be doing anything on the base that was not already happening, and that the work would impact on brownfield sites, already much disturbed, rather than the range.³² He assured the Chair of the Committee that Defence would continue to consult with local Aboriginal groups and, should something of

28 *ibid.*, page 26.

29 *ibid.*, page 25 and 28.

30 *ibid.*, page 35.

31 *ibid.*, page 32..

32 *ibid.*, page 33.

cultural heritage value be found, contingency funds would be spent on preserving it.³³

- 3.31 Once the scoping of the consultation process on environmental and cultural heritage matters was finalised, the Chair asked Defence to let the Committee know precisely what they were intending to do in this area.³⁴

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that after the consultation process on environmental and cultural heritage matters has been completed, the Department of Defence report its findings to the Committee.

Consultation

- 3.32 On the question of consultation, Defence informed the Committee that they had extensive contact with a number of interested groups and councils. This included notification about environmental processes to 83 organisations.³⁵ However, they noted that the formal process only began when sufficient documentation was completed at the time when the matter was referred to the Committee. In the weeks before the hearing, there had been public consultations at Moorebank, Illawong and Ingleburn.³⁶
- 3.33 A number of consultations were foreshadowed at the hearing: an extensive environmental consultation process; consultation with a range of aviation related organisations; consultation with various State instrumentalities and organisations; and consultation with various building and planning agencies. A full list is provided in the submission at paragraph 72.

33 *ibid.*, page 36.

34 *ibid.*, page 36.

35 *ibid.*, page 12..

36 *ibid.*, page 12..

Recommendation 2

Subject to satisfactory reporting of the first recommendation, the Committee recommends that works relating to the proposed relocation of the 171st Aviation Squadron to Holsworthy Barracks, NSW, proceed at the estimated cost of \$92 million.

Hon Judi Moylan MP

Chair

15 February 2006