

Customs – A key player in the airport team

By Alan Page

In some ways, Sydney Airport is like the foyer of a gigantic hotel. Many thousands of people passing through, some coming, some going, with thousands of staff members trying to make the experience as pleasant and as inconvenient as possible. In this scenario, Customs has a key role to play.

We have about 500 passenger processing staff assigned to Sydney Airport, with a substantial number at work at busy periods, such as early mornings, the peak arrival times for international flights. Relations with fellow airport community clients are excellent and we can boast the provision of a truly professional service often under trying circumstances.

There is also a wider group of organisations on whose behalf we undertake functions and with whom we have developed close working relationships. They include the Australian Federal Police, the Attorney-General's Department, the New South Wales Police, the National Crime Authority, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. Other agencies with which we work include the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Defence, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the NSW Child Protection Unit, the NSW Ambulance Service, consulates and embassies and many government agencies in other countries.

The tasks performed for these agencies are many and varied. They range from clearance of prosecution witnesses or people under police escort, official visits by leaders of other countries, religious leaders, stretcher cases and, the most difficult of all, arriving passengers who may not be aware of the death of a loved one.

Sydney Airport has two areas for arriving passengers and two for departures. Over the past couple of years, we have dramatically changed the way we operate in a successful program to speed up the movement of passengers through the airport.

As a result, processing times have improved, mainly through electronic initiatives and reductions in processing procedures. Gone are the days of a dozen different immigration stamps and the full name and date of birth. Now electronic readers scan passports or visas and the job is done in an instant. Currently we are slightly exceeding our standard, processing more than

95 per cent of passengers within 30 minutes of each person's arrival.

Expansion of the Advanced Passenger Clearance system will mean further improvements to immigration processing and will provide more valuable assistance in Customs risk assessments. And it should provide considerable productivity gains for all partners in the scheme. More than 20 per cent of arriving and departing passengers are electronically 'pre-cleared' by the APC system, which is a partnership between several airlines, Customs and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The target is to have about 60 per cent of passengers cleared by APC in 2000.

To say Sydney Airport is an interesting place to work is an understatement. With so many travellers, there is always something happening. We have had travellers arrive with pockets full of live fish, dogs travelling first class, and even the filming of various movies, including the second Babe movie.

Alan Page (pictured below), formerly Senior Inspector, Passenger Processing, recently moved from Sydney Airport to join the Customs liaison team at the headquarters of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games.

