

## The way we were

By John Maloney

**I**t was 1964. We were examining baggage at Sydney Airport. The international terminal was in an old tin shed, where the Qantas domestic terminal is today.

A handful of daily flights were serviced at Sydney with domestic connections to other states. There was a sprinkling of Super Constellations among the Electras and new 707 and DC8 jets.

It was uncomfortably hot in summer and cold in winter, with ambient weather conditions introduced through roller shutters opened to bring in the baggage and with it the lingering scent of burnt aviation fuel. Baggage benches were basic as were the stand-up desks used to form the 'immigration line'.

Air travel was still a novelty and done with style. Barely a day went by without a celebrity passing through. Airline hospitality staff met and escorted first-class passengers as if they were royalty. Flights subject to quarantine were cordoned off and passengers disembarked to be screened by Commonwealth medical officers. No vaccination certificate meant a jab on the spot or off to North Head Quarantine Station.

After health clearance, we cleared passengers through immigration and they reclaimed their baggage from carts. Next stop was at the baggage channel for Customs clearance with declaration in hand. In those days it was a mix of uniformed searchers and newly appointed clerks. Very few women were employed and they were paid at a lower rate and had to resign when they married. The working conditions were dismal with staff standing all day in regulation suit and tie applying rudimentary risk



*Sydney Airport arrivals.*  
*Above, in 1960: a Customs Officer checking passports and entry documents.*  
*Below, early 1970: Baggage examination.*







*John Maloney – today*

assessments. We were looking for quarantine items and high revenue goods such as cameras and transistor radios or extra cigarettes and liquor.

Who could forget the departure of the Wellington, New Zealand, flight? This was a 1am Electra service that sometimes flew half way across the Tasman Sea before returning due to weather conditions, with the boarding officer having to be recalled.

Training was elementary and mainly on the job. When I first reported for baggage duty the inspector said, "Here son, read this passenger concession leaflet. Then at least you'll know as much as them". Life was simple and carefree as Australia's prosperity grew and drugs were very rarely heard about.

As air travel expanded and pressures increased, overtime was becoming common and downtime had to be accounted for. We were all uniformed in hats, long-sleeved shirts and black trousers. No hat meant summary discipline even when the sweat ran into your eyes.

One officer tried to beat the heat by working behind a counter immaculately uniformed from the

waist up but wearing a pair of shorts. The shift inspector made an appearance, but from on the passenger's side he did not notice. Otherwise a disciplinary charge would have been a certainty along with a lengthy disqualification from overtime.

In May 1970, the new international passenger terminal opened on its present site on the western side of the airport several months before the inaugural 747 flight.

The late 1970s marked a new era in air travel with cheaper fares opening up travel to many more people. Customs had become fully computerised.

Narcotics became the main threat to border integrity and a new seriousness was evident in the way we did business. Techniques of detecting likely drug couriers or other smugglers were in their infancy and the foundation for today's improved processing had been laid.

In 1988, the newly corporatised Federal Airports Corporation began an urgent injection of capital as growth at Sydney Airport outstripped capacity. An expansion program

introduced larger baggage reclaim units and expanded passenger-processing capacity. Some computers were introduced to the workplace and risk management became scientifically based.

Today our border responsibilities are managed through the disciplined application of risk management, supported by sophisticated computer systems and other leading edge technology. Passenger flows, workloads and staff deployment are computer modelled for maximum efficiency and effectiveness. We work alongside other key airport stakeholders to contribute to the total airport journey while meeting our obligations to the Australian community to prevent introduction of undesirable persons and goods. Our large, highly trained workforce is made up of diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

We can look back with a degree of nostalgia on the rapid evolution of commercial air travel at Sydney Airport with an expectation of more exciting and challenging times ahead.

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