

Commitment to the Commonwealth Games

As Ian Thorpe, Cathy Freeman and nearly 260 other victorious Commonwealth Games athletes, officials and VIPs alighted from their chartered plane into the crisp Melbourne winter morning, they were greeted with a warm-hearted welcome from the small, yet vociferous, congregation of local school children, media and specially invited fans.

Fans included the Prime Minister and sports and government officials among its ranks. Then, after most of the athletes had done the quick round of interviews with the media and signed autographs for the fans, they were transported to prepare for a triumphant civic reception in the city's heart and to sponsor commitments.

But for this to happen, and have the athletes reach Australian soil, get off the plane and be immediately embraced by family, friends and supporters, there had to be a major coordination effort by Australian Customs to ensure that every member of the Commonwealth Games team was processed

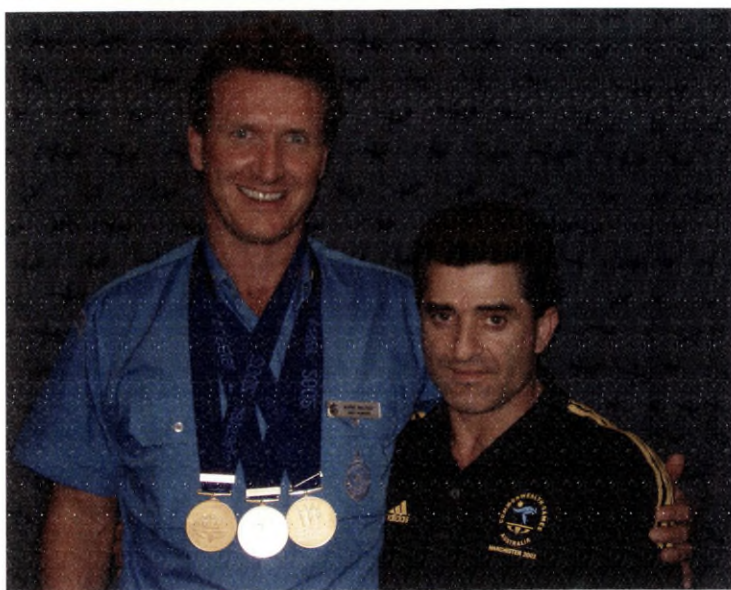
before the flight, and to ensure that no members of the team posed a threat to Customs laws.

To facilitate pre-processing, and ensure there was no undue delay between the athletes and their civic duties, Customs staff began organising the athletes' return six months before the event, and developed a plan that rivalled the best laid of military operations.

The process started with representatives of the Australian Commonwealth Games Committee and Qantas making a request to Customs, the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and Australian Quarantine for pre-clearances. To work towards this end, Customs Officer Ray Hallett and an AQIS colleague undertook a preliminary planning trip in May, and from this the beginning of a pre-processing strategy was hatched.

After several months of detailed planning and inter-departmental liaison, a pre-clearance team consisting of Customs Officers Mark Wilmot, Jenny Miller and Linda Lui left for Manchester. They arrived at Manchester Airport on 2 August and were given a warm welcome by their British colleagues. After formalities, they were taken to inspect, and become familiar with, the area in which they would be undertaking the pre-clearance operations.

On 3 August, Mark Wilmot, with representatives from AQIS and Qantas, visited the athletes' village to discuss the departure arrangements with the Commonwealth Games Committee Chief and the team leaders of the various sports disciplines. At this meeting,



top: The Wunala Dreaming after landing: returning home with more than 250 Australian athletes, who were greeted by the Prime Minister in the Qantas maintenance bay at Melbourne Airport.

bottom: Customs officer Mark Wilmot, on a flight to Australia from Manchester, with Australian weightlifter Yourik Sarkisi, the owner of the medals.

Customs and AQIS representatives distributed brochures to be given to the athletes that outlined procedures and the legal responsibilities for passengers.

On 5 August the Customs pre-clearance team were transported by bus to Manchester Airport and were shown by British Customs officers the border control infrastructure of Manchester Airport - including a viewing of their holding cells, urine and saliva sampling units and the special toilet they have for use by suspected internal couriers.

Later that afternoon the Customs pre-clearance team were taken to the special area where they would carry out the pre-clearance of the Australian Commonwealth Games contingent. The specially organised pre-processing area consisted of three parts:

1. The first was where the athletes would affect check-in formalities at the British Airways counters. Here they were issued with baggage tags and boarding passes. However, the athletes kept their luggage with them.
2. They then moved down to the next area, which we had set up for Immigration formalities, and had their Inwards Primary Cards checked and coded. The passenger list had been input under "expected movement" in Melbourne so each person was ticked off the list as they moved through this area.
3. The athletes then presented themselves for x-ray clearance of their hold luggage.

The Customs pre-processing team consisted of Jenny Miller carrying out the primary work, Linda Lui checking permits and declared goods and Mark Wilmot - who moved between both of these tasks as the need arose. From a quarantine perspective, the attending AQIS officer stood behind the x-ray machine and gave instructions to search any baggage deemed necessary.

The pre-processing team were very fortunate, and appreciative of the fact, that several British Customs officers made themselves available at the x-ray point to be on hand to assess

any British Customs matters, and also attend to value-added tax (VAT) refunds as necessary. They also made themselves available to assist in queuing and marshalling as needed.

As it transpired, there were only two instances of baggage that needed to be checked by Customs on arrival at Melbourne Airport, and these were both athletes from the shooting team. The first had packed his documents in with his rifle. As all firearms were checked by British Customs at Bisley (where their competition took place), bonded and taken directly to the hold of the plane the pre-processing team were unable to check his accompanying documentation.

The other instance was another shooting team member who had purchased two new rifles in England, were inspected upon arrival at Melbourne Airport and held pending a safety check. A team doctor also declared a small amount of Diazepam, which she was happy to leave with British Customs.

The specially chartered flight arrived at Singapore on 6 August, and Qantas ground staff had alerted Singapore security that the pre-processing team would require x-ray images of reboarding passengers. This went without a hitch, and the security officers from Singapore were very helpful with any assistance.

The flight arrived on schedule at Melbourne Airport in the early hours of 7 August and the feeling on board the flight was quite emotional, with everybody saying how good it felt to be home.

What the athletes probably didn't consider as they landed was the amount of effort that went into the pre-processing the charter flight by Customs staff, and the cooperation that occurred between all concerned parties. All Immigration formalities were completed by the time the pre-processing team left Manchester, and the team arrived on schedule and in an orderly fashion. They had been briefed well by their respective team managers and this allowed for very efficient processing.

Only a few items of a quarantinable

nature were declared. Of particular note was that all the members of the rugby union team had to have their shoes cleaned thoroughly and out ready for inspection by AQIS officers before their departure because of the possible presence of Foot and Mouth disease which had decimated domestic farmers in recent years. The feedback received from team members and officials was overwhelmingly complimentary. The assistance provided to the pre-processing team by British-based airport personnel was outstanding, and largely attributed to the smooth success of the operation.



Customs officer Ross Hannah (right) with Leanne Ryland and John Dourlay next to a mobile radio station in the Tullamarine maintenance hanger - to broadcast live the return of the athletes to Melbourne.