

A great way to go to work

Customs officers at Mackay District Office in Queensland were faced with the problem of quickly getting to and from international bulk carriers anchored kilometres offshore, waiting to load at Dalrymple Bay Coal Terminal.





Above: Customs officers in a helicopter hangar at Mackay airport.

They enlisted the services of a local helicopter charter company to fly them out. In that way, officers could be whisked from ship to ship and carry out Customs and immigration formalities and minimise delays for Customs and to the crews themselves.

This was some two years ago. It has been an outstanding success.

Dalrymple Bay Coal Terminal is some 38km south of Mackay. It is Queensland's largest export coal terminal and one of the largest facilities of its kind in the world. It has around 1000 Customs-involvement ship arrivals each year and accounts for approximately six per cent of the world's seaborne coal trade.

It is an impressive enterprise that keeps the 11 officers at the District Office constantly occupied. Boarding and clearing the vessels is one of their many functions. There can be up to 30 bulk carriers at anchor at times, waiting to berth at the terminal to be loaded up with their cargo, mined from coalfields in Central Queensland.

For the terminal to keep up with mounting world demand for coal, the operators have to work as speedily as is safely possible to transfer the cargo to the waiting vessels. Thus, the need to quickly complete government formalities, such as Customs and immigration procedures, is essential. District Manager Dave Thoms* and his team tried several alternatives before getting approval from Customs management for the helicopter option.

At first, Dave and his team drove to Dalrymple Bay—up to an hour each way. But it was not just the time or the distance. Because the two wharves themselves are about five kilometres offshore (along a single-lane “road”), boarding vessels from them is often difficult because of the tides, the swell and the uncertainty of the weather.

They attempted boarding the bulk carriers from boats but there was a degree of danger in this for the same tide, swell and weather reasons.

“After trialling boats, we began boarding the ships by helicopter,” Dave said. “We found it to be much more efficient, much safer for the officers and we are able to board the ships in a much more orderly fashion.

“In an average week, we will clear about 20 ships. We board them with at least two officers and sometimes with four and six or eight officers, depending on the risk that we believe the ship may pose to Australia.”

The officers board their chartered helicopter at Mackay Airport, saving the one-hour drive. The flying time to the closest vessel takes about eight minutes; the most distant up to 15 minutes.

“When you look at them from the air and from a distance, these ships look like a postage stamp. You really wonder about how you are going to board a ship that way —how the chopper is going to fit on the ship. But, as you get closer, the ship gets larger and larger. By the time you



are almost on the deck, the ship is huge—plenty of space for many choppers to land.

“The ships’ masters are aware of our arrival before landing. The reason we have to give them that kind of heads-up is for them to get a fire party ready. Any time a helicopter comes to land on a ship, there are crew dressed in fireproof clothing waiting for us. They also have the fire hydrants ready as a safety precaution.

“The reason we don’t give them more notice is that we want to drop in unexpectedly. We don’t want to give them too much advance notice because we want to see if there are any prohibited goods on board.

“If everything is in order and we don’t find any reason to look any further or ask any further questions, the formalities can be completed in around an hour. But we could spend any time, even days, on the ship. We can bring in extra resources as and when required.

“While it takes eight to ten minutes to get to the first ship, after that, we can leapfrog from one to another in two or three minutes.

“The helicopter generally waits with us while we do our work. We may drop two officers on one ship and another two on the next one and then continue leapfrogging. It might pick up four and put them on one ship together—any combination we like.

“When we board the ships, we speak to the captain and ensure all requirements have been met such as Customs arrival forms, crew forms, and personal effects on board and

that the documentation is in order for the cargo that is being collected. Customs also works with other government agencies. For example, if we see goods that should be referred to Quarantine, then we do so.

“Everyone that has had anything to do with this applauds the initiative. Certainly industry is supportive of us getting on board as quickly and as efficiently as we do. The crews are impressed that Australia sees this as such a high priority that they allocate the resources for us to do this. They have not seen it anywhere else in Australia and it seems not anywhere else in the world.”

Dave Thoms says officers at Mackay “look forward to going to work each day. They come back from their helicopter trips with smiles on their faces. What is better than flying out over the blue waters of the Whitsundays each morning and seeing the whales frolicking down below? It’s fantastic. It is just a great way to go to work.”

The charter operator, Whitsunday Helicopters, has done more than 60,000 landings on ships off Dalrymple Bay, not just for Customs but for transferring pilots, company representatives and crew as well as taking out urgently needed equipment and supplies. Customs officers have done over 1000 landings.

* Dave Thoms has since taken up a Customs position on Thursday Island off the northern tip of Queensland.