

From the Cape to PNG

JASON DICK describes the work of a Thursday Island Customs officer.



Jason Dick on the Wauri at Thursday Island.

To many people the work of the Australian Customs Service often appears to be a somewhat mundane, if necessary, shuffling of forms and faxes, applications and permissions. It is easy to forget that this is by no means the sum total of Customs activities. In fact, little could be further from the truth.

The Customs District Office of Thursday Island, with its seven officers, is responsible for the geopolitical jigsaw puzzle that comprises the Torres Strait. It is an old port, established more than 100 years ago, with a somewhat turbulent history. It was a keystone to Australian colonial activities in western Papua New Guinea and an important communications, fuel and supply centre for the allied forces in the Pacific Ocean campaign during World War II. There still exist old fortifications that date back to British Empire fears about the colonial aspirations of the Russians in the 19th century. The Strait is a major route for commercial shipping and smaller private vessels moving from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.

At the port, and the international airport on neighbouring Horn Island, Customs processed 436 clearances in 1996 and just under 400 in 1997. So far 1998 promises to be a bumper year for the boarding officers, in large part due to Australian Army famine relief flights to Papua New Guinea. Coastwatch operates three resident aircraft and planes visit from Darwin and Cairns on daily flights throughout the year. Under the Torres Strait Treaty, an average of 20 000 people travel

to and from the Strait and PNG every year for traditional purposes, without the immigration controls standard elsewhere. It is, in short, a very busy place.

The first thing I noticed when I started at Thursday Island (TI in local parlance) was that a typical day was generally anything but typical. A boarding job is not just a matter of knowing the forms and walking up a gangway - you also have to learn how to drive, launch, recover and maintain a speedboat. When a phone call is received regarding illicit or suspect activity, officers will usually attend the scene by helicopter or patrol boat, two more modes of transport that require special skills, just to ride around in. (Anyone who has been strapped into a cage, blindfolded, dropped into a swimming pool and turned upside-down to simulate a helicopter crash into the sea will agree that the main skill is not to panic).

Tropical disease is another fascinating subject for the newcomer; squeamishness about needles is not an option. Neither is a tendency to air-sickness or a fear of flying; one has to be able to convert that thick adrenal rush that accompanies flying at 200 kilometres an hour in a helicopter at tree-top level into a cool detachment or, at least, yahooping bravado. One officer has been chased across a flooded mud flat by sharks.

The political landscape in the strait is no less fraught with peril. Recent media interest has put the spotlight on government activities here. Officers must be attuned to all manner of political concerns. These range from indigenous aspirations to self-determination and the sensitivities of the Wik and Mabo cases to issues of wider community interest, including the use of the strait by illegal migrants, drug traffickers and gun runners. Increases to resources in the Torres Strait by the Prime Minister under the National Illicit Drugs Strategy place an even greater burden of responsibility on Customs TI office to perform in a complex environment.

For the staff here, however, this challenge is no greater than those they have faced in the past and will no doubt face in the future. The Torres Strait is once again a focal point for the nation's attention to protection of its own interests. This time it is not Japanese Zeros or Russian warships that have upped the ante, but the sound of outboard motors over the crash of the surf at night, driving small craft that might be carrying drugs, firearms or illegal entrants.

Jason Dick is Customs Operations Officer on Thursday Island. He has been there for two years and has served as Office Manager and Senior Boarding Officer.