

The crusade for a Customs uniform



Preventive officers of the 1950s walk along Sydney wharf to examine baggage of arriving passengers.

The history of the Customs uniform is as diverse as the history of the organisation itself. Uniforms played a significant part of the colonial Customs presence pre-Federation, and then went through an unsteady period after the formation of the new Commonwealth of Australia.

The new Commonwealth decided that the wearing of the colonial uniforms should be discontinued. A Minute from the Comptroller-General stated that "the decision to dispense with all uniforms worn by Customs officers (except the hat bands or ribands which were allowed by waterside officers) at Federation was influenced by the elaborate uniforms worn in some States."

However, in 1909 General Orders, the Commonwealth prescribed that, "Where it was the practice prior to Federation to provide uniform for certain boatmen and officers of similar grade, such

practice may continue, but new appointees must provide uniform at their own expense."

In 1916, the General Division Officers' Union of the Department of Trade and Customs successfully petitioned the Comptroller-General to supply uniforms for launch crews. The uniform included cap, badge, oilskin coat, sou-westers, sea boots and overalls.

So launch crews had uniforms but there was unrest over the supply of uniforms to others. In 1918, the General Division Officers' Union took the Department of Trade and Customs to the Arbitration Court. The Comptroller-General stated that "there was no uniform for coxswains other than the cap and badge, but more importantly stated that the supply of uniforms was not a constitutional right brought over by officers from the State services."

So, in their civilian clothes, wearing hat ribands with badges as their

only official markings, Customs officers undertook their everyday tasks of exercising authority to "board ships, ask questions of passengers and crews, examine all luggage, search passengers if necessary and generally to exercise the fullest possible control over shipping and passengers." Commonwealth authorities had decided that the wearing of hat ribands with badges was all the identification that was required and "had not failed in any instance to ensure to the officer the necessary authority."

In 1920, the acting Comptroller-General issued a Minute that uniforms were only to be supplied by the Government when officers were required to wear a uniform in the exercise of their duty. The Boarding and Landing Services of Customs wore uniforms because of their contact with the public. The Comptroller-General was of the opinion that there was no position where it was essential for an officer to be supplied with a full uniform.

Even when Customs officers took responsibility for assisting the Commerce Department with "issuing licenses for aliens and naturalised British subjects" in 1940, they still wore the most simple of uniforms. This also was the case when they assisted the navy in searching vessels that naval intelligence assumed to be carrying German mines.

A new employee at that time, Lawrence Townsend, recalled that, when he started work with Customs, he was sent to the "hat people in High Street to buy a trammies hat, upon which he stuck

a Customs badge before taking up his post on the wharf."

Passengers frequently confused Customs officers for baggage porters because of their lack of uniform. One officer "wore his former post office uniform, without its identifying badges, to give some semblance of his law-enforcement function."

Even in 1953, when Customs officers were required to perform both immigration and Customs duties and used trained preventive officers to check for smuggling, they were still without a uniform.

It was only in April 1955 that Customs officers returned to wearing a full uniform – navy trousers, navy coat, blue shirt, blue tie, peaked cap with Customs

insignia and royal blue enamel lapel badges.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a rank structure was brought in for preventive staff. This uniform remained until the early 70s when a new uniform was introduced that lasted until 1996-97 and now Customs officers have the uniforms of today.

* This information has been collected from David Day's books *Smugglers and Sailors* and *Contraband and Controversy* as well as from research conducted in 1999 by Chelsea Trubody from Customs Commercial Compliance Section.



In a self-designed Customs uniform, Mrs Athena Antonopoulou, appointed in 1957 as an interpreter, dealt with questions from arriving migrants as well as checking foreign films and books for signs of indecency.