Case study: the effect of containerisation on Sydney

By Peter Chinn, who worked for Customs for 40 years, including on the Sydney waterfront from 1959 to 1964. His earlier years were spent as an assistant wharf examining officer, later advancing to wharf examining officer in charge of wharves at Woolloomooloo and Pyrmont

Handling of containerised cargo revolutionised shipping. In Sydney, for example, special terminals were built at Glebe Island and White Bay (and later at Port Botany) with cranes for offloading/loading containers.

Containers gradually rendered redundant virtually all the existing wharves in the port as containerised cargo replaced the old methods of cargo handling.

Container terminals required large areas for the stacking of containers pending removal and, in Sydney, depots were established at areas such as Rozelle, Waterloo, Villawood and Chullora. These were lower-rent areas, well away from the waterfront where Customs and maritime activities had traditionally been located, but connected with the ports by rail. At times, Customs had staff permanently established at these container depots.

With the exception of bulk cargoes such as coal, wheat and ores, the cargo handling process before containers was labour-intensive, slow and inefficient.

Teams of waterside workers would descend into the holds of a ship to physically move individual packages on to a rope sling (rather like a large rope net).

When full, the corners would be attached to the hook of the ship's crane which would then haul the load out of the hold. Once on the wharf, another team of waterside waters would unload the contents.

Wharfies would trundle most crates/cases on a two-wheeled barrow into the wharf shed where cargo was checked in by tally-clerks and stacked.

Under the old system, Customs had permanent offices at about 40 wharves in the port of Sydney. Each was under the charge of a Wharf Examining Officer who was responsible for ensuring all cargo imported by a vessel at his wharf was properly accounted for in accordance with Customs requirements.

He would receive the manifest for the ship from the ship's owners/agents and would acquit deliveries by Customs entries or other acceptable documentation. The officer would also collect duty from crew and passengers as well as clear passenger's effects.

With the coming of containerization, a major procedural and organisational change came into effect. Authorisation for delivery of cargo (and accounting for cargo) was centralised in a branch at the Customs House where importers and agents attended, instead of at a wharf office. Nearly all wharf offices were closed and the Sydney waterfront was divided up into four or five geographical areas, each under the control of an inspector with a staff of examining officers and assistant examining officers who carried out examinations and other Customs control tasks at wharves.

This system represented a more effective and efficient use of resources. Around the same time, another radical change came into effect: documentary control. This involved officers visiting shipping company premises to examine records to verify compliance with all Customs requirements.

Over the intervening years, enhancements have been made to our controls of import and export cargo while at the same time meeting - and anticipating - the requirements of the importing and exporting communities.

Australian Customs has always been attuned to change and has a proud record in successfully meeting all challenges.