

Innovation recognised through leading edge training



above: Customs dog handler from Brisbane, Dave Shepherd, using the fall-arrest harness lowers detector dog Storm into the hold of a ship for a training exercise on the maritime and aviation environment awareness course.

inset: Andrew Dawson, a Customs dog handler from Adelaide, demonstrates the fall-arrest harness as he lowers himself into a confined space in the hold of a ship.

The Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission has publicly recognised Australian Customs Border Search Training Centre in Sydney for its achievements in safety. The centre won the prestigious Workplace Safety Innovative Solutions Award.

At a ceremony at Old Parliament House in Canberra in July, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Tony Abbott, presented the award to Customs CEO Lionel Woodward.

Centre Manager Frank Malkoun said the centre had identified that a large number of staff throughout Customs were in need of special occupational health and safety training, particularly those in border-related environments.

As development of the training

modules and acquisition of equipment began, the centre found the equipment quite basic and lacking the requirements for the sometimes dangerous operational environments that Customs officers work in.

"Due to the potentially hazardous nature of these environments, occupational health and safety has been of paramount importance in the development of training and the procurement of suitable

equipment," said Frank.

A video presentation of the shortlisted applicants for the awards emphasised the importance on the development of the centre's fall arrest harness.

After exhaustive testing and research of the industry-standard safety harness, staff at the centre identified potential

hazards and a need for the centre to develop its own equipment.

"The industry standard safety harness has the rope attachment point at the back for fall arrest," Frank said. "We recognised that this would pose major hazards for Customs staff because of the confined spaces our employees enter. With the potential for serious personal injury due to cargo and machinery, we recommended the fall arrest attachment should be connected at the front of the vest."

The length of rope for the harness was another concern. Industry standards are between one and two metres. After testing, staff at the centre determined that 600mm length of rope should be the standard for the fall-arrest harness.

By reducing the length of the rope, the potential for damage to internal organs, whiplash-type injuries and from being swung out of control into machinery or other objects was reduced.

The centre also modified safety harnesses to allow for the large amount of equipment Customs officers must carry while conducting a search

In consultation with local manufacturers, the centre designed, developed and manufactured a number of other innovative devices and programs to be incorporated into training including:

- purpose-built simulators to give Customs employees experience in confined space conditions
- modules on basic climbing techniques, height management and personal protective equipment
- advanced first aid and trauma management modules.

Quality control is an element that the centre prides itself on. It offers a standardised approach to training at one location, ensuring that all procedures and practices related to the search function are conducted in a consistently safe manner.

"The centre certifies employees as competent in all aspects of the training

program before they can perform potentially dangerous searches," Frank said. "The students become confident in their ability to identify and deal with potential hazards, skilled in first aid across a range of environments and experience practical operations through simulation.

"The centre is committed to occupational health and safety and will continue to revise best practice search methodologies. This revision includes national and international procedures and staff having regular contact with other jurisdictions. The free exchange of information will ensure that the centre will continue to provide leading-edge training with health and safety issues a priority."

The centre's innovations have resulted in increased demand for training courses within Customs as well as from other government agencies.

The Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission introduced the safety awards last year as an incentive for Commonwealth agencies to continuously improve injury management and occupational health and safety.

Nominations were invited from all Commonwealth agencies in two categories: workplace safety leadership and workplace safety innovation solutions. The centre's submission was entered into the innovation category.



Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott (centre) with Customs CEO Lionel Woodward (third from right) and the Border Search Training Centre team, from left, Ros McQueen, Frank Malkoun, Robyn Carr, Nathan Phillips and Tony Wheatley.