

Ship security stepped up since September 11

By Alicia Carbone

Times are changing. The world is not what it was 18 months ago. A global innocence was lost on 11 September 2001 and the devastating impact of terrorist actions was brought tragically home to Australians with the Bali bombings on 12 October 2002.

With national security now such a high priority, Customs is targeting all ships that arrive in Australia from overseas ports, checking for signs of possible terrorist threats. It is the job of the Customs boarding officer to make assessments that the Australian community depends on for the security of the nation.

"I carry out a combination of enforcement, risk-assessment and intelligence-gathering activities," said Sydney boarding officer Martin Gregory, who has been in the waterfront enforcement operations environment for almost two years.

"Boarding direct arrivals [from overseas ports] is now a priority in the wake of recent terrorist actions.

"Our job has always been to look for drugs, weapons or stowaways - or evidence of the previous existence of these things on board - but now we pay very close attention for any signs that there could be possible terrorist related threats on board."

The role of the Sydney boarding officer is an intriguing mix of paperwork and active duty. The workplace can morph from an air-conditioned office to the windswept bow of a yacht moored in Sydney Harbour, or the overheated engine room of a hulking container ship.

"The boarding officers board a vessel



and make an assessment of that vessel, from both an Immigration and Customs perspective," he said. "It involves dealing with paperwork and questioning members of the crew, as well as exploring parts of the vessel and using search techniques to try to locate items of interest.

"We also pay attention to the wharf environment in general, monitoring the type of visitors who attend the berth, and talking with these and wharf staff about any information that might be useful to Customs.

The NSW Director of Enforcement Operations, Phil Paraggio, said that significantly increased scrutiny of arriving vessels involved risk-assessing the people on board, as well as the ship itself.

"Before boarding vessels, pre-arrival details such as crew and passenger lists are checked against relevant databases," Mr Paraggio said.

"Once on board, a crew muster takes place and a full face-to-passport check is conducted. Travel documents are inspected for authenticity and travel movements. Articles, which are the crew's terms of engagement, are also checked for anomalies. For example, if one crew member has joined the vessel recently, while the rest of the crew have been on board for a lengthy term, we would look more closely at that."



above: Taking ionscan swabs during a ship search is an effective way of detecting narcotic residue.

top right: Customs Officers Martin Gregory and Debbie Scurr relax and appreciate the view after a hard days work.

"We also take the opportunity to do some Customs paperwork - checking bonded stores, sealing any weapons or restricted drugs on board, verifying certificate expiry dates," said Mr Gregory.

Next on the agenda is a check of the vessel's logs. The deck log is compared with the electronic voyage recorder, or black box, and the engine room log. Any discrepancy is cause for concern, and the Master is asked to provide an explanation for course deviations or unscheduled stops on a ship's route.

Mr Paraggio said communication tools were also inspected by Customs.

Following these preliminary checks, a walk-through of the ship is conducted. Exit points, such as gangways, gunports and service cranes, are searched in response to overseas evidence that suggests they are a favourite hiding spot for prohibited imports, as they enable offenders to take advantage of the opportunity for a quick offload.

"We have begun to take a look around the ship in general, examining areas for possible hides, and using both technology, such as the ionscan and detector dogs, and recently acquired search techniques gained from the National Search Training Centre at Neutral Bay," said Mr Gregory.

"As we gain more



experience, we are finding more information and learning more skills that should increase our chances of finding significant infringements."

Customs ship boarding officers are required to attend ship search courses such as the marine environment awareness course at the National Search Training Centre, which familiarise the participant with the shipping environment, as a prerequisite to participating in shipping operations.

Mr Gregory said that the increased focus on training in the shipping area would provide staff with an important foundation for the future.

"Training and practice are the two most important things we should be concentrating on at the moment," said Mr Gregory.

"From experience overseas, any part of the vessel can be used to conceal prohibited imports or stowaways.

Effective and safe search and surveillance techniques are most important at this stage."

Mr Paraggio said the re-emergence of shipping as a high-risk area for Customs was largely due to increased screening and examination in other import streams, particularly passenger baggage, air cargo and mail, and the introduction of container examination technology at major ports.

"The use of technology to mass screen goods of all types raises the risk of detection of criminal activity, and has the potential to make

shipping more attractive to criminal syndicates," he said.

Shipping was a high priority for Customs 40 years ago, but for different reasons. In the late 1960s-early 70s, as many as 50 ships were berthed in Sydney Harbour at a time: migrant ships, cruise liners and cargo vessels. Quarantine due to human health constraints was the cause of concern.

Customs investigator Greg Cashel, who worked in Shipping from 1967 to 1972, recalled that every vessel arriving from an overseas port was boarded mid-harbour, first by a doctor to ensure it was free from disease, followed by Customs, who would also perform quarantine functions.

"High tariff rates also encouraged a roaring trade in smuggled dutiable goods, particularly watches and transistor radios, so ensuring compliance by arriving crew was another strong focus," Mr Cashel said.

Mr Paraggio said the implementation of risk-management techniques and technology, such as the closed-circuit TV, eventually led to the ending of 24-hour wharf patrols in Sydney in 1998.

"Customs decided to take a different approach, which was more effective and resource efficient," Mr Paraggio said. "Risk-assessed boarding takes into account that most clients are honest."

But now new threats have emerged and port security is a top priority for Customs.

top: Majestic sight - a container vessel berthed in Botany Bay.

right: Martin Gregory gets down to the business of verifying the crew's passport details.

