



# Protecting our airports

By Jan French, Air Border Security Team, Brisbane

Customs plays an integral role at Australia's international airports facilitating passengers and cargo in and out of the country. What may not be as well known is the role Customs plays monitoring and protecting the security of our airside borders on tarmacs around the country.

Brisbane Airport is one location that has a specialised team of officers dedicated to air border security (ABS).

The functions and duties of ABS officers are varied and utilise a broad range of practical and personal skills. A major priority is preventing and detecting conspiracies to bring illegal goods into the country; for example, narcotics and firearms.

Additionally, the threat of explosives or weapons being moved or hidden on aircraft has increased due to escalating terrorist activities worldwide. To counter this, officers conduct aircraft searches and gather intelligence to concentrate resources on selected targets.

Targeting and profiling is carried out using information from local, interstate and international Customs and law enforcement bodies. By exchanging information with overseas Customs agencies, a broader view of concealment methods and current trends can provide a useful tool when considering which arriving flights to target. Some foreign countries may be profiled as 'high risk' due to their high rate of drug or terrorist activity. Consequently, flights originating from these ports may attract more interest from Customs.

Alternatively, ABS officers may receive information of a specific nature through international contacts and construct an operation on that basis. This information may be a tip-off involving a passenger or a suspected shipment of narcotics being brought into Australia.

All ABS officers are certified in aircraft search through an intense training course covering theory and practical aspects of searching different types of aircraft. Due to the technical and mechanical nature of craft, there are many safety issues to consider as well as the challenge of "where do you start?" Areas of possible concealment on an aircraft are numerous and not always obvious. There are hidden storage cabinets, spaces concealed behind easily removed panels and, of course, everyone's favourites - bins and toilets that need to be dismantled and inspected. And everything has to go back to the way it was when you started. A concentrated search of a specific area may be carried out or a team of officers may conduct a 100 per cent aircraft search.

Technology and tools available include portable video equipment and telescopic mirrors for searching inaccessible areas, narcotic detection and identification kits and closed circuit television (CCTV) surveillance.

Recently, Australian Federal Police (AFP) Protective Service officers were invited to participate in a Customs aircraft search course. There are occasions when Protective Service officers assist ABS teams and joint training such as this helps ensure there is consistency in search procedures and techniques. It also provides an opportunity to build on multi-agency harmony in the workplace.

Other Branches of Customs, such as drug detector dogs and handlers, may also be deployed to assist ABS officers with specific search tasks on aircraft.

As airport security is an Australian Government law enforcement responsibility, ABS officers have opportunities to work with other agencies in the areas of intelligence sharing and tasking. This relationship enables a more cohesive and efficient security environment at the airport.

The AFP has staff at 11 Australian airports and provides a counter-terrorist first response capability through its protective service operations dedicated to aviation security. As AFP and Customs share an interest in countering terrorist activities at airports, there are occasions when joint operations are conducted. A good example of this would be an AFP explosive detection canine team (EDC) assisting the ABS in an aircraft search.

The EDCs can be deployed to search cargo holds and/or inside the aircraft to detect weapons or explosives. The dogs can be used to maximise the area that can be covered in a specified time frame.

EDC searches of passengers' hand luggage may also be conducted prior to boarding. ABS officers involved in this type of search are constantly watching body language for any signs that may indicate that a person may be of interest to Customs. Questioning techniques can then be used to determine if further investigation of the person and their belongings is warranted.

International traveller numbers into Brisbane are increasing as is the diversity of countries they are travelling from. These factors increase the necessity for Customs to monitor border security at airports. Only a dedicated team of officers who have specialised skills can compete with the operations of highly-organised and well-funded drug and terrorist organisations. ABS teams are one section of Australian Customs that contributes to the deterrence and detection of aviation-based criminal activity.



Above left: Ian Rossall from the Brisbane Air Border Security Team performs a routine search of an aircraft.

Above: Air Border Security Team officers Michelle Lummis and Ian Rossall search overhead lockers in an aircraft at Brisbane Airport.