

The Portswatch (Air) Unit



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By Detective Superintendent Rob Tunnicliff

AS Sydney Airport remains Australia's gateway for 60 per cent of all overseas visitors, the Portswatch Unit at Sydney Airport is an important link in national and Eastern Region investigations.

Portswatch (Air) Unit looks after the AFP's various interests connected with Sydney Airport. Rotating shifts give coverage from 5 am to 'last flight' clearance every day of the year. The Unit's prime role is to respond to the Passenger Automatic Selection System (PASS) alerts and intelligence gathering. Over 30 airline companies now use Sydney Airport, making liaison a continuous task for the Unit.

Sydney Airport opened as an airfield in May 1911. The flat ground adjoining the Cooks River provided access for seaplanes. Ten years later the Commonwealth acquired the aerodrome as an initial investment in the development of a nationwide network of airports. By 1952, Sydney Airport carried more passenger traffic than any other airport in the world outside the United States, with the exception of London's Heathrow Airport.

In the 1960s, the airline industry throughout the world experienced

massive change with the introduction of the Boeing 707 and later the 747. Travellers were being moved increasingly by aircraft rather than the traditional ocean-going liners. A new international terminal was opened at Sydney Airport in 1970 to cope with these changes. The runways have carried a range of aircraft from bi-planes to Boeings.

Today, Sydney (Kingsford-Smith) Airport has annual passenger traffic equal to Australia's population. Approximately 19,000 people are employed at the airport, including 5000 air crew. In an average month, for example, about 350,000 international passengers are processed through the airport and up to 145 movements occur each day. When it was opened in 1970, the international terminal building was one of the Australia's largest construction projects. Twenty years on and with extensions due to start later this year, the terminal will double in size, allowing 22 jumbo jets to be accommodated at once. Forecasts into year 2010 estimate international traffic equivalent to 1988's combined domestic and international traffic.

Drug related inquiries form the

basis of Portswatch investigations; however family law and other crimes do impact upon the duties. Family law is particularly difficult to enforce when members have to decide quickly on what action to take. Parents often deliberately leave boarding an aircraft with children until the last moment to thwart inquiries. Late at night and on weekends are usually the times these people choose to attempt departure in an effort to make it difficult to check on the facts of court orders or warrants. Delays to aircraft are costed at \$1000 per minute, but once a child is allowed to fly out, the chances of getting him or her back to Australia are slim.

Portswatch staff throughout Australia depend on accurate and timely advice from all users of the PASS alert system. When a decision needs to be made, sometimes the only reference material they have is the information provided when the alert was raised. With the extra pressure placed on the staff working at Sydney Airport, they need all the help that they can get to make the right decisions.