



The remains of the Darwin Customs House after a Japanese bombing raid, during the Second World War.

'It's fair dinkum'

The many vessels diverted to Australian ports by the sudden Japanese entry into the war were an added burden on the hard-pressed officers. Some vessels had half-loaded cargoes with little or no documentation. And the whole confusing jumble was hoisted on to Australian wharfs from where it took some eight months to clear. Apart from the problems of dealing with miscellaneous cargoes of doubtful origin, officers were also faced with evacuees of all colours and creeds; some with passports, valid or invalid, or with hurriedly prepared Certificates of Identity and others without any official personal documents at all other than a vaccination certificate.

More than 5 000 evacuees arrived at Fremantle in the drama-charged months between December 1941 and March 1942. Three hundred and

Like the current situation with East Timor Customs officers faced an increase in vessels, cargo and evacuees during the Second World War.

twenty-one vessels arrived, 124 of them in March alone.

Officers who had rigorously enforced the "white Australia" policy for decades now found themselves faced with "evacuees and refugees of all colours arriving in this White Australia of ours". They coped as best they could, with clerical officers from the Perth Customs House being drafted in to assist the Fremantle boarding officers in applying the

Immigration Act "as best fitted the different passengers, some of whom were removed to hospital per ambulances and may not even know now that an Australian Immigration Act exists". Not surprisingly, many of the Chinese crewmen were unwilling to face the risks of war and some 455 were removed to a military detention camp before being drafted into an army labour corps. Fremantle boarding officer Timperley worried at the effect on "white Australia," complaining that the "local Army and Navy officers know nothing and apparently care less of our Immigration laws". A Customs officer was detailed to keep track of all the alien interlopers.

Source:

Contraband and Controversy: The Customs History of Australia from 1901 by David Day