

Richmond airbase:

you never know what might drop in

By Chris Schofield



above: Customs District Manager at Richmond, Robert Delaporte, explains Customs procedures to RAAF personal.

right: Hercules transport aircraft on the tarmac at Richmond Royal Australia Air Force base.

On the north-western outskirts of the Greater Sydney region, at the picturesque foot of the Blue Mountains and beside the meandering Hawkesbury River, lies Richmond Royal Australian Air Force base, home of the transport squadrons.

At this semi-rural location, the environment is generally very pleasant but occasionally it is severe - winter temperatures can drop into minus figures in the early mornings while, at the height of summer, they can rise to the 40s, caused by a combination of sun and the thick tarmac surface of the surrounding runways and roadways.

Richmond accommodates three main squadrons comprising 24 Hercules and four Boeing 707s. These aircraft are principally involved in transporting military personnel and equipment to wherever they are required, within

Australia or overseas.

This is practically a 24 hours seven days a week activity, which requires a permanent Customs presence to carry out the necessary clearance of inward and outward international aircraft, their crews, passengers and cargo.

"We virtually run like a mini Sydney Kingsford Smith Airport and perform a myriad of functions just like a commercial airport," is how the Customs District Manager at Richmond, Robert Delaporte, describes the job that he and his fellow officer, Grant Robinson, are engaged in.

Customs activity at Richmond developed into a full-time presence in the late 1960s in response to increased aircraft movements during the Vietnam War. At this time, Customs had three staff at Richmond to deal with aircraft clearances, mainly to and from

Butterworth, a RAAF base that was established in Malaysia. However now, with the reduction in military personnel at Butterworth, Customs presence at Richmond has been reduced to two.

One of the current major tasks of the two officers is the processing of military personnel and their dependants. They clear arriving and departing passengers, perform baggage searches, detain or seize prohibited imports, collect Customs duty, goods and services tax and the passenger movement charge, and administer the Tourist Refund Scheme.

Richmond is also a major air cargo centre for the Australian Defence Force and the cargo hub in Australia for the United States Air Force, which also has a permanent presence on the base. For instance, the Joint Defence Facility at Pine Gap near Alice Springs has a large United States contingent and regular USAF flights provide support for this establishment. As a consequence, the Customs team at Richmond is involved in clearing household goods or personal effects of both Australian and US defence personnel.

"In my time here, I have encountered very few problems," said Robert. "Most people on the base understand what role we play. They know we have a job to do and they let us get on with it."

The two officers work two shifts during weekdays from 6am to 2pm and noon to 8pm and take it in turn to be on call at weekends. When duties arise outside these hours, they respond as necessary.

Generally, the bulk of the flights that occupy Customs attention are either going to or coming from American Samoa, East Timor, Guam, Malaysia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea or other places in the Pacific.

The majority of the aircraft using the base are Hercules although sometimes a Russian Illyushin will fly in via Pearce, in Western Australia, to drop off bonded military cargo from Diego Garcia. Over the years, Richmond has seen British Nimrods, F1-11 fighter jets and US naval carrier aircraft.

"The hum of Hercules aircraft can usually be heard from the confines of the office," said Robert. "On rare occasions, you can hear the sound of a jet aircraft flying past at high speed but, by the time you look up to see exactly where it is, it is miles away in the distance."

When the aircraft are not flying, there is still plenty to occupy Robert and Grant. One task is to deliver Customs information sessions - or 'briefs' as the military prefers to describe them - to ADF personnel departing for overseas.

"When I address a group of about 15, I usually raid our display cabinet for examples of prohibited imports to show," says Robert. "I also take with me a stack of passenger cards, crew forms and *Know Before You Go* brochures. Then I just stand up and start talking.

"For larger groups, I have put together a more formal presentation with overheads and information from a variety of Customs sources, as well as

information about Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and Environment Australia requirements."

Because AQIS does not have an officer permanently stationed at Richmond, Customs has delegation to perform quarantine tasks in the event of an AQIS officer being unavailable. Robert says that Customs and AQIS enjoy a close working relationship on the base and work together to ensure controls are maintained.

"Controlling through cooperation would be the best way to term it," Robert said. "Also the military keep us abreast of what is happening on a need-to-know basis, which seems to be a mutually satisfactory arrangement."

Robert's description of Richmond is that of a relaxed, friendly place in which to work. "The base is literally a small town with almost every conceivable amenity located on site," he says. "It has a post office, credit union, barber, hairdresser, newsagency, automatic teller machine, swimming pool, gymnasium, cinema, hospital, dental surgery and a small shop selling everything from takeaway food to stereos and washing machines. It's a good place to work."

As for contact with Central Office and other sections of Customs, this RAAF outpost is far from isolated, according to Robert: "We can call for backup and advice whenever it's required. It's reassuring to know that the rest of Customs is only a phone call away."

