



Memories of Mascot Aerodrome

History officer Peter Chinn recalls Customs transport at Sydney Airport in the years after World War II.

At the end of World War II, commercial air transport was in its infancy and international carriage of passengers and goods was of miniscule volume compared with shipping. Most air movements to and from Australia were by flying boats which were considered more reliable for trans-ocean flights, a form of air transport which had reached a high level of development during the 1930s. They had a much larger passenger and cargo capacity than land planes and it was not until the late 1940s with the coming of the Lockheed Constellation and Douglas DC4 and DC6 that the balance tipped in favour of the latter.

In 1946, at Mascot Aerodrome, as Sydney Airport was known then, there was an average of eight inward flights weekly from the United Kingdom, the United States and New Guinea. In addition there were occasional unscheduled flights by Dutch and US military aircraft with passengers from the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia) and Manus Island, respectively.

On the other hand, weekly arrivals at Rose Bay Flying Boat Base in Sydney Harbour comprised seven Tasman flying boats—one each day—carrying up to 30 passengers from New Zealand, three Hythe flying boats from the UK, with up to 18 passengers, and one Coriolanus flying boat from Fiji.

Early in 1946 Customs decided to staff the airport with three officers on a permanent basis and they were located in a couple of rooms beneath the original control tower. Both the airport and Rose Bay Flying Boat Base came under the control of Landing Branch.

In November of that year, the acting Senior Inspector, Landing Branch, wrote the following minute to the Collector: "Owing to the area covered by Mascot Aerodrome it is necessary for some conveyance to be supplied for officers when planes land on the outskirts of the aerodrome. A jeep would probably be the most suitable type of conveyance owing to the nature of the ground over which it would be necessary to travel". He recommended that the matter be referred to the Comptroller-General for approval. Inquiries were made of the Commonwealth Disposals Commission (a body responsible for the disposal of surplus war equipment) but it indicated that most surplus jeeps had been committed and there was very little likelihood of any more becoming available. The Commission advised that ex Royal Navy utilities would soon be coming up for disposal at a price of 300 to 400 pounds and would keep Customs informed. Pending the availability of a jeep, a pre-war Chevrolet tourer (Commonwealth plate no. C51531), used by Landing Branch, was made available for use at the airport.

Much discussion ensued between Customs Central Office and Sydney office over the provision of vehicles not only for Mascot but also Darwin, Brisbane and Melbourne. With the proposed transfer of the flying boat base from Rose Bay to Botany Bay, adjacent to the aerodrome, there was a recognised need for two vehicles at Mascot.

As an aside, correspondence between Central Office and Sydney (apropos the problem of



smuggling by air) dealt in some depth with the purchase of a pair of binoculars "if they are obtainable"!

The big breakthrough came in February 1947 when the Disposals Commission informed Customs that two jeeps were available. The Transport Officer reported: "I inspected the jeeps at Ryde Car Park, but found it was impossible to form an opinion of the mechanical condition of the vehicles as the engines could not be started due to their not having been in use for a long period...I was informed that any vehicle acquired from the Disposals Commission would be in a similar condition and no indication could be given of their true condition".

He added that the price of the two vehicles were "180 pounds each, less the cost of reconditioning which was arrived at viz. 50 pounds and 45 pounds respectively".

On 25 March 1947 the Comptroller-General sent a telegram to the Collector in these terms: "Your telegram today purchase of two jeeps at prices mentioned is authorised".



Early in 1949, no doubt at the instigation of Mascot officers, a person, who gave his address as simply 'The Aerodrome, Mascot' wrote to the Collector expressing concern at the condition of the two jeeps. He stated that, "the two vehicles are really a menace to public safety and should not be allowed on the road. I am sure the police would never grant them registration if the vehicles had to comply with normal traffic requirements as other motor vehicles are required by law to do". The person said he had "spoken to nearly all of your men about the jeeps during the past year and the usual remark is that they are definitely unsafe and should never be on the road. Your men say that they always 'take their lives in their hands' every time they drive them and invariably refer to them as 'coffins on wheels'".

The Collector appointed an investigation officer to inquire into the complaint. In his lengthy report, he advised that the officer in charge of Mascot stated that he had never received any complaint from the officers under his charge nor from any other person, regarding the safety or condition of the jeeps. Similarly, all of the officers who drove

the vehicles (there were now about 12 officers at the airport) and whom the investigation officer had interviewed stated "that they had never made any complaint to the officer in charge or to any other person regarding the safety of the vehicles nor had they any knowledge that any of the other patrol officers at the station had done so".

Experienced Drivers

The officer in charge said that essential maintenance and repairs had been carried out as required. The standard of service could not have been very high because a worn brake drum on one of the jeeps caused it to "incline towards the left when braked suddenly". However he had instructed that only experienced drivers were to handle this particular vehicle.

During the course of the investigation the officer elicited some allegations from an unstated source that at times up to nine people had been carried in a jeep—this for a very basic vehicle designed to carry only four. The officer in charge denied any knowledge of this but said that on rare occasions he had known six at the most to be carried.



Mascot Aerodrome circa 1950s.

No further action was taken concerning the jeeps following this inquiry and things might have proceeded smoothly until the jeeps fell to pieces but for an incident which occurred—or rather was observed—on Sunday 18 December 1949.

Probably the most powerful and feared figure in Customs after the Collector was the Personnel Officer (later designated Inspector Personnel). Up until the mid-1960s, before line managers assumed responsibilities for discipline, this function was left to Personnel. The officer in charge of Personnel and his handful of subordinates were the de facto 'police force' of Customs. They would raid pubs during working hours to catch imbibing officers, make home calls

on suspect officers on sick leave and observe unauthorised movements from Customs House and follow up with charges under Section 55 of the *Public Service Act* when necessary.

Fateful Day

At precisely 3.17pm on that fateful day in December 1949, the Personnel Officer, who lived near the airport, observed one of the Mascot jeeps proceeding along Illawarra Road, Marrickville, from the direction of Earlwood to the airport. The following day he checked with the officer in charge and found that this and other journeys made on 18 December were not



recorded in the motor vehicle diary. The Personnel Officer made further inquiries and, based on petrol drawn from the boatshed and recorded usage, concluded that the jeeps were only getting five miles to the gallon!

In those days very few officers had their own cars and there was no public transport serving the airport. There were trams along Botany Road, about one kilometre from the airport, and the nearest station, Sydenham, was served by industrial buses which still only travelled along Botany Road.

Abused Concession

The Personnel Officer, in his report to the Collector on the matter, pointed out that there was no obligation on the part of the Department to provide transport for officers and concluded that the concession "has, for some time, been abused".

He considered that vehicles were no longer needed for patrolling the airport and the requirements for duty to be conveyed to the Customs House or films to be sent to the Censor's Office could be adequately accommodated by the Landing Branch car calling at the airport at 10.40am and 3.10pm daily.

He concluded his report with the recommendations that the jeeps be withdrawn from service immediately and disposed of and that officers arrange their own transport.

Jeep Withdrawal

Accordingly, on 6 February 1950, the Senior Inspector, Landing Branch, directed the immediate withdrawal of the jeeps which had served their country so well not only in time of war but also on the battlefield of Mascot, Illawarra Road and, no doubt, watering holes along Botany Road.

An airport staff of three in 1946 has expanded to around 580 in 2007 and eight arrivals per week to 565. While the three officers might have considered themselves busy if they processed 20 passengers off a converted Liberator bomber, Customs officers at the international terminal are now dealing with 13,000 inwards passengers in the course of a day. Three regular international operators have now grown to almost 50.