

# THE AIRPORT 'BEAT' CONTINUES

By Keith Livingston

**T**O the vast majority of Australians the only time that they ever laid eyes on or came into contact with an Australian Federal Police uniform, it was being worn by a member on duty at one of the nation's major airports.

Since the end of June last year, that Federal Police 'keeper of the peace' uniform presence has disappeared from the airports and is now confined to within the borders of the Australian Capital Territory.

As far as the average traveller is concerned it would seem the AFP no longer has anyone working at the airports.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

The AFP's Portswatch Branch is still very much operational and undercover or plain clothes officers are on hand 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

While there is some variation between the precise operational procedures at each of the major international airports around Australia - the 'theme' is consistent throughout.

At Melbourne International Airport for example, the Portswatch members are kept busy handling information; examining records; studying intelligence reports, and keeping watch on the many thousands of people who pass through the barriers each and every day of the year.

Portswatch also has a responsibility to respond to, raise, amend and delete what are known as Passenger Automatic Selection System (PASS) alerts.

This national computer-based system is designed to alert authorities should, for example, a person wanted on criminal matters attempt to leave the country.

The system is also used to great effect with Portswatch members on hand to respond immediately to Customs Service or Immigration alerts.

Portswatch members are able to provide assistance to the officers of other Government Departments - both State and Commonwealth, if their services and police powers are needed.



*A Customs Officer inspects a passenger's papers. AFP Portswatch members are first on the scene after a Customs drug find.*

It has not been uncommon for the Australian Taxation Office to request AFP assistance in the apprehension of a person trying to leave the country or for the AFP to act in support of an order of the Family Court by physically preventing a child exiting Australia.

The Portswatch Branch members are - in most instances - first on the scene after an Australian Customs Service drug find.

It is the responsibility of these AFP investigators to obtain vital information from a suspect in the early stages of that person being taken into custody.

They must determine whether there was a rendezvous planned - and if so - where the proposed meeting is to take place ("...here at the airport - or somewhere else?").

Often the success or otherwise of an investigation will depend on the initiatives taken by the Portswatch member in those critical first few minutes after he or she starts the interview process.

Such is the importance placed on the role of the Portswatch team that only the best of the experienced in-

vestigators from regional headquarters are considered for duty.

Portswatch members work a rotating roster and work from an office within the airport complex.

Apart from moving around the terminal - being ever watchful for the 'unusual' - they also rely quite heavily on information being delivered to them with minimal delay.

Team members are prepared to swiftly initiate the techniques and skills they have been taught and developed over many years of policing experience.

They become especially vigilant when an alert suggests they may expect the imminent arrival of a suspected courier of illicit drugs.

We have all heard the expression, "...you could cut the air with a knife..." That rather over-worked cliché could be used with great accuracy during these times. To suggest the members become keyed up, would be an understatement.

They approach their work very seriously in the cognisance that the next drug interception may be the key to success in bringing a 'Mr Big' to justice. •