

# Flight mode

There's never an average day for AFP members when it comes to the complex operation of policing Australia's major airports.



The mission of policing Australia's major airports is a complex mix of community policing and critical national crime issues.

It's peak hour at Sydney Airport and there is the unmistakable feeling of people being 'happy'. Lines of average people from Australia and overseas are either coming or going to the destinations that have brought them here on any average day, week or month of the year. Overwhelmingly, these travellers are in the grip of that optimistic feeling of holiday anticipation or just doing something out of the routine.

The organised chaos unfolds almost too mystifyingly well. More than 38 million people will pass through Sydney International Airport alone in any given year.

They are facilitated on their way by an estimated 50,000 24/7 staff who work in the airport precinct; either in the 800 businesses, as management staff or other service providers. It's a massive undertaking by any standard.

"It's like a small city," says Detective Sergeant Brennan Wilton. At its busiest times, Sydney Airport does have a George Street vibe. The Sydney domestic and international precinct spans the equivalent of two Sydney suburbs and about the same area as a local NSW Police district.

[Click here to watch an interview with Airport Commander Sydney Sharon Cowden](#)



"Every day is different," he says. "When someone asks 'what's your average day?' it's hard to answer." It's a sentiment echoed by many of the more than 100 fulltime AFP police officers at Sydney Airport and more broadly at Australia's nine major airports around the country. The opportunity to practise what essentially is community policing is a big attraction for police officers at the airports.

There is definitely a lot happening. Detective Sergeant Wilton points to a small white board with the list of current trials in process that his team currently has on the books. They range from endangerment on an aircraft to a bomb threat at the airport and indecent acts. His is just one of 8 teams. A comparison to community policing in a city police district or big country town is more or less inevitable. In fact, senior police do agree it is the perfect training ground for young police officers to learn basic policing skills. This is a rare opportunity for the AFP whose National duties are largely removed from a usual community law enforcement role.

One day it is removing an inebriated passenger from an aircraft, the next day it may well be dealing with a mental health situation. "At other times," says Superintendent Conrad Jensen "you can't go across to the terminal without someone engaging with you or asking where the train station is".

"I'm regularly engaged in conversations with people from around the world, like 'I'm a sheriff from Texas' or every now and again a member of the public thanking us for the work we do. This is one of the appealing aspects of a uniformed policing role."

Airport Commander—Sydney Sharon Cowden agrees that the daily contact with the public is a valuable experience. "The thing I like is your critical thinking and appreciation of complex situations and your responsiveness is much sharper because you are operationally responding every day," Commander Cowden says.

She says it could be any number of situations where critical thinking and how an officer responds can make all the difference in a tense situation.

"It might be an agitated customer service issue that needs defusing or a dangerous situation that threatens police and the public. There are many examples around Australia's airports where the great work of the AFP has de-escalated and controlled potentially dangerous situations. This sort of policing really keeps people sharp and improves their appreciation and critical decision making skills."

## Complexity

But Commander Cowden says that there are many more complex layers to airport policing that transcends a simple analogy with a country town.

"Ultimately we are an Australian border port," she says. "I'm sure people realise that as an island nation we have a lot more ports than most countries. This does create a challenge and the number of challenges that it creates might not be fully appreciated."

One of those challenges is that law enforcement at airports takes its place among a complex network of stakeholder relationships. Airlines are in the business of carrying passengers and airport corporations are in the business of running the airport. Then there are partner agencies protecting the border such as Australian Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Quarantine.

Commander Cowden says commercial stakeholders do appreciate the law enforcement challenges and liaison and collaboration works remarkably well. "It's about making sure each agency knows where it fits and understanding your own and others' objectives."

But this arrangement adds significant extra layers of complexity. Legislation since the September 11 attacks now shapes the modern operations at airports. Commander Cowden emphasises that a



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AFP members patrol Sydney terminal.

Constables Sharn Hyde and Sarah Gleeson.



comparison to a large town no longer accurately captures the real nature of airport policing.

The use of aircraft as missiles essentially changed the game for airport security. The development of the current operating model has evolved through the 2005 Wheeler Review, the 2009 Beale Review and the 2009 Aviation White Paper.

“We also police a critical piece of infrastructure,” Commander Cowden says. “We are a place of mass gathering and we are a part of society that is worthwhile to apply extra layers of security to.

Protective Service Officers and state and territory police were transitioned to a wholly sworn cohort of AFP members at Australia’s major airports under a unified Commonwealth model. Legislation also calls for Explosive Detection Dog presence, which Commander Cowden says is a great deterrent at critical infrastructure.

Armed Air Security Officers (ASO) operate on domestic and international flights for containment or resolution of high-risk security incidents. ASOs blend with other passengers and could be on any flight. They are deployed in response to current threat assessments and form part of the AFP’s ongoing deterrence strategy.

The Joint Airport Intelligence Groups (JAIG) are located at each major airport and bring together officers from numerous stakeholder agencies. In particular, JAIGs are made up of representatives from the Australian Border Force, AFP and local state or territory police.

Joint Airport Investigations Teams (JAIT) were established at major airports in November 2005 and deal with ‘trusted insiders’ in the aviation sector. The JAITs work closely with the JAIGs and AFP Serious Organised Crime in each region. They also include staff from the relevant state and territory police forces.

JAIT Sydney Team Leader Detective Sergeant Dwayne Robertson says “criminal relationships don’t start at airports”. But once commercial aviation staff members are compromised then “they are in a

position to exploit their positions” Detective Sergeant Robertson says.

“It’s not just a particular crime itself. Once someone is compromised they are vulnerable to other offences. Once your integrity is compromised, what then is exploitable? If you can bring in 50 kilograms of cocaine is there then a problem with bringing in a firearm or something else?”

## Diversity

Another aspect of airport policing as an international port of entry is the convergence of crime types. Just the sheer number and diversity of transient people in the small geographical footprint brings all types of offenders and all types of situations.

“It’s sort of skewed at that end,” Commander Cowden says. “Certainly terrorism and foreign fighters, transnational crime, child sex tourism – anything with an international focus to it we tend to see it here.

“We are also responding to these crime types like larger narcotic matters, counter terrorism matters, people smuggling matters and international money laundering that you might not see in a small town all that often. Transnational sex offences, identity crime all of those things are all coming through the border.”

This diversity is an added attraction for new police officers. Constables Christophe Boulay and Claudia Lindsay graduated from recruit training in June 2014. Since then they have conducted their training as special constables with New South Wales Police, which allows AFP members powers under the host jurisdiction.

Both have worked on drug importation jobs as part of their duties. Claudia says the opportunity to see the investigation of a drug importation through all the processes has been invaluable experience.

Christophe, in fact, was involved in a drug importation case on Day 2 of the job. He says: “It’s exactly what I was expecting. That’s what they said



Air Security Officers practise their skills.



at the college that it would be – a mix of small jobs and bigger jobs.”

The diversity of experience at airport policing is also a big attraction for Constable Sharn Hyde. Sharn says he has walked up to 15 kilometres patrolling the terminals on some days. But whether it is working on a drug importation or just mixing with the public it's not your average day in flight mode.

“I enjoy the environment. There is something different every day and different people to talk to,” Constable Hyde says. “You see the highs, you see excitement, you see sadness – you see all sorts of the things through the airport. So it is that changing dynamic I guess.

“The airport is a unique environment. We are highly visible out here and again I think people are happy to see us and talk to us out here. It gives them a sense of safety in terms of their travel and obviously there have been security issues over the years in Aviation. Police give people a sense of safety and confidence in traveling throughout the airport.”



Constable Sharn Hyde unloads his service handgun at the end of the shift.