

COLLECTING AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMS INSIGNIA

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Photographs by John De Belle, No. 872.

Brian Bennett joined the Department of Customs & Excise as a Preventive Officer in 1967 and later served as a Supervising Investigator until transferred to the Australian Federal Police in 1979. John De Belle joined the Australian Customs Service as an Assistant Customs Officer in 1990 and is currently serving as a Customs Officer Level One. For the purpose of this article both members pooled their Australian Customs collections.

The collection of revenue is always close to the heart of any government and, during the period from 1788 until 1901 when Australia was made up of six separate British colonies (at that stage the NT and the ACT were part of South Australia and New South Wales respectively) each of those colonies had it's own Customs Service. Not surprisingly those colonial Customs were modeled on H.M. Customs of Britain, even down to the use of that same title.

In the Colony of Van Diemens Land (later Colony of Tasmania) the Naval Office performed the function until 1807, when a Customs Service was established. It was not until 1827 that the New South Wales Customs Service took over the function from the Naval Office.

It is known that the Tasmanian Customs issued uniforms to officers performing certain functions, and we have seen a sketch dated 1874 of officers guarding a shipwreck whereby they all appear to be wearing identical clothing, long boots and caps but without sign of insignia.

It is recorded that in 1879 West Australian Customs Landing Waiters (Customs Boarding Officers who performed ship clearance duties) were to be issued uniforms consisting of: 'blue serge single breasted frock coats with 4 brass buttons inscribed 'Customs WA' and headwear of a white helmet for summer and a blue cloth cap with black ribbon bearing 'HM Customs WA' in gold, for winter use'.

The South Australia Customs by 1885 were known to be wearing a fancy double breasted naval style uniform with 10 brass buttons down the front and peaked caps bearing a large Queen Victoria cap badge (QVC) made of bullion thread.

In an official photograph dated 1888 again showing WA Officers they appear to be wearing uniform similar to that prescribed in 1879 however now with a large 'VR' cypher (for 'Victoria Regina' or 'Queen Victoria') 'HM Customs' bullion thread badge on their cap. Photograph No. 1 depicts a replicated version used by the Australian Customs Service during the Bicentenary celebrations in 1988, which was stitched to the black band of a black cap. A white shirt with wing-collar was worn beneath the double-breasted black uniform with two rows, each of 4 brass buttons down the front. Note that there are now 8 buttons as against the original 4 as prescribed in 1879 see Photograph No. 2.

By that same year, the Customs Officers in Tasmania were wearing similar uniforms to their WA counterparts.

In NSW, colonial Customs boat crews wore wide brimmed straw hats with a black ribbon with gold lettering: 'H.M. Customs' as well as a similar arm brassard, but alas, like all the items mentioned thus far, don't have them in our collections.

Following are photographs of our joint collection. Photo No.3 depicts the oldest items available to us. The top centre brass disc numbered '66' is definitely pre-1901 as it bears the British Coat of Arms (the 'Lion and the Unicorn') and is inscribed 'Australian Customs New South Wales'. Efforts to identify its use have failed with the best guesses being that it was either a key-ring tag for example, to Locker No. 66, or, may have been used by Customs detectives as an identification badge linked to their fob chain (similar to the Victoria Police of early last century). The disc is blank on the reverse, as is mine (which is numbered '148'). I think it very unlikely that there would have been anything near 66 detectives on the strength of NSW Customs, let alone 148 of them so that swings the argument toward the discs being key ring tags.



The 2-piece metal cap badge at top left bearing the Kings Crown was in use by Boarding Officers at least in 1915. It was made by 'Amors' of Sydney and has 'HM Customs in gilt upon blue enamel, with gilt laurel wreath surrounding. Above is gilt KC with red enamel inserts. These obsolete KC badges were still in use in 1967 and as late as 1970 at least, but worn only by Senior Preventive Officer (SPOs were the equivalent of a Sergeant of Police) when in charge of Ship Rummage Teams. Another anomaly is that the SPOs wore this old obsolete KC badge on their red hard hats (used during the ship searching), whilst the POs they led merely wore a black hard hat without any insignia. Away from rummage duties, the SPOs wore an identical uniform to POs except for gold rank stripes on epaulettes and on tunic sleeves.

The similar metal badge at top right also came from 'Amors' but bears a post-1952 Queens Crown. Before co-author John showed me this I had never seen one bearing the QC and as John also had no knowledge we have concluded that it must have been manufactured as a prototype, but never introduced.

The same photograph No. 3 shows two metal curved badges. Both are of blue enamel with chrome trim and lettering: 'H.M. Customs'. The 'banana' badge on the left was introduced in 1949 with the creation of the Prevention Section. Such badges were worn, one each side, on the lapels of the uniform tunics issued from 1949 onwards until at least 1957 (but probably until the re-organization of 1965) to members of the Prevention Section, which was responsible for Customs enforcement on the waterfronts and at the airports.

The left one was worn by Preventive Officers (POs - the base level uniformed patrol and search officers) The one on the right is identical except that it carries a Queens Crown (i.e. issued after Elizabeth II ascended the throne in 1952). The crown is chrome with red enamel inserts. It is not known if the lapel badge bearing the crown replaced the earlier 'banana' badge for all ranks after 1952 or if it was then issued to SPOs and more senior officers.

When I joined the Prevention Section in 1967 as a PO I was issued a black double breasted naval style uniform, worn with a white long sleeved shirt, a black tie and a white topped cap with black peak and black puggaree to which was sewn a badge made of bullion thread identical to the 'H.M. Customs' QC badge shown on the lower right of the photo. The two sized buttons at centre, which were made of Bakelite and depicted the Australian Coat of Arms, were fitted to the issue overcoat and the tunic. Epaulettes were worn on the shirts as summer uniform.

Photograph 3 also shows two old style bullion thread QC cap badges: 'HM Customs' on right with 'Customs' on left. I believe that the 'HM Customs' badge was introduced in 1952 (replacing the old c. 1915 metal KC badges) and it continued in use until replaced by the QC 'Customs' version in 1975.

During 1975, a mid-blue uniform with pale blue shirt, dark blue trousers and a dark blue tie replaced the old black and white naval style uniforms. The new headwear was a blue peaked cap without a puggaree and bore the bullion QC 'Customs' badge. The uniform was similar in appearance to that of the then Royal Australian Air Force.

Photograph No. 4 provides detail of the two bullion thread cap badges mentioned above.

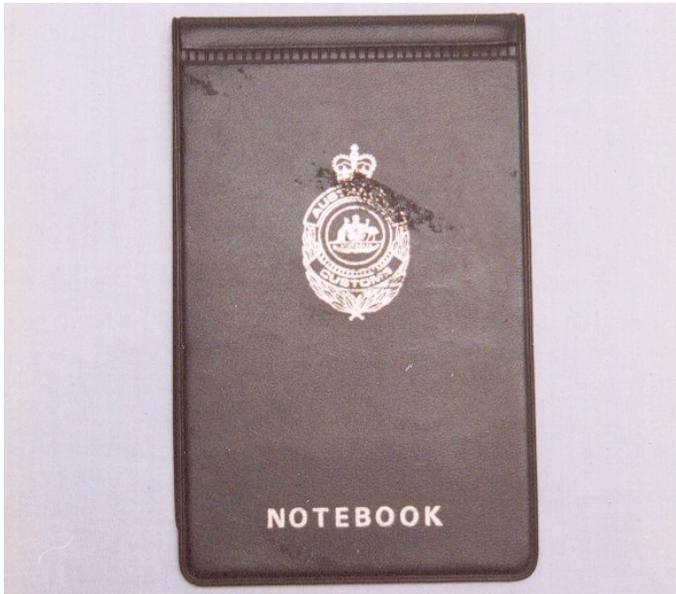


Whilst not shown (as neither of us possess one) I have seen a photograph, circa 1950, of an officer performing duty at Darwin Airport who is wearing what appear to be metal epaulettes on his shirt which are voided with 'HM' above 'Customs' in two lines.

Photograph No. 5 depicts a collection of Customs identification badges, designed to be carried inside wallets, however no wallets were issued, only these pieces of hard PVC, which were numbered according to each State or Territory. It is rare to see such a collection of intact ones as officers tended to insert them into their personal wallets carried in hip pockets which resulted in them being split down the centre due to sitting down. It is not know exactly who else were issued these ID badges, however it is certain that Investigators from the Detection Operations Group used these during the mid-1970s.



Photograph No. 6 shows one of my old notebook covers. The 'Australian Customs' badge - style logo was introduced about 1975 and is still in use.



When I joined Customs in 1967 I was issued with a small hard black cardboard identity folder. From memory it had 'HM Customs' in gold on the cover. Inside was a typed statement declaring that I was indeed a Customs Officer and it was signed over the official Customs Seal stamp by the Collector of Customs for New South Wales. It did not contain a photograph. Later more professionally produced ID was supplied as shown later in the following paragraphs.

The Customs Narcotics Bureau was formed in 1968. By 1970 at least, members had been issued an ID wallet containing a plastic ID card with photograph. The actual wallet was green leather with the title 'Commonwealth Narcotics Bureau' in gold lettering on the outside plus the Australian Coat of arms.

Later, in 1976, those green wallets were withdrawn and replaced by plain black leather wallets containing the identity card plus the 1975 issue Australian Customs breast badge with the word 'NARCOTICS' printed in black upon the white stripe. Unfortunately they were surrendered in 1979 and we don't have one, although there are some samples on display at the Australian Federal Police Museum at Weston Creek, ACT.



Photograph No. 7 depicts two identity cards. The top one, No. 24 was newly issued in 1976 to me as a replacement and featured the new Australian Customs badge logo introduced the year before. The lower photograph is of John De Belle's ID card No. 3435 was issued in 1990. It also depicts the red and blue secondary logo of the Australian Customs Service, as it was now known.



Photograph No. 8 shows two official reproductions of the new badge logo introduced in 1975. On the left is the generic 'Australian Customs' badge, which is still in use whilst on the right, is the logo of the Narcotics Bureau. The Bureau underwent a number of name changes between 1968 when it was formed as the Customs Narcotics Bureau, later the Commonwealth Narcotics Bureau, then the Australian Narcotics Bureau and finally (and up until it's abolition in 1979) the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Neither of these shown were 'real' badges merely used on letterheads, wall plaques, door decals, etc., and indeed being a plain-clothes outfit, no Narcotics Bureau badge existed except for the ID badge as outlined earlier.



The official issue metal belt buckles depicted in Photograph No. 9 cover two eras. The lower one shows a Queens Crown over 'Customs' over two oak leaves. This buckle was introduced with the new uniform of 1975 and when you compare its logo you will note that the pattern is identical to that of the new style cap badge on the left in photo No. 4. For unknown reasons that buckle were phased out fairly quickly after it's introduction and replaced with a plain metal buckle. These 1975 buckles are now sought after items.

The top buckle in Photograph No. 9 shows a new style and smaller buckle introduced in 1998 along with a completely new uniform.

The same photograph shows two official issue name badges, the lower one being issued to John when he joined in 1990 whilst the '3084' replacement upper badge was issued along with the new uniform in the more security conscious 1998.





Photograph No. 10 shows a montage of epaulettes, all of which were replaced with the uniform change of 1998. The top plain pair was on issue pre-1967 when I joined. They were then issued to base-grade Preventive Officers and, later, when the titles changed, to the base-grade Assistant Customs Officers. The buttons were gilt with the Australian Coat of Arms.

On the centre line at left are the epaulettes with a single gold stripe. That stripe was added, in the old days, after the Preventive Officer successfully completed the Barrier Examination (which also led to a salary increase). In later times the single stripe denoted a Customs officer band one, the second rank. The center pair, with 2 gold stripes, were worn in the earlier days by the Senior Preventive Officer (SPO) with that rank later being changed to Customs Officer Band Two. The same applied to the '3 striper' or Assistant Chief Preventive Officer (ACPO). That title later changed to Customs Officer Band Three. The most senior rank in the older days was CPO and there were only a handful- 3-4, of them in Australia. I cannot recall their epaulettes however think they had 4 gold stripes.

On the bottom line, from left to right are the later ranks of Customs Officer Band Four (Inspector), Customs Officer Band Five (Senior Inspector) and at right bottom, Customs Officer Band Six (Chief Inspector).



After many years of little or no variation to insignia the new uniform issue of 1975 appeared to kick-start change. Photograph No. 11 shows a variety of badges, which were just some, of what was issued between 1975 and 1988. The 'white stripe' breast badge at bottom left was issued to POs with the new 1975 uniform. The same badges (but with wording 'NARCOTICS' was then issued as ID to NB Investigators. The tie bar went with the new uniform and matched both the belt buckle and the new QC cap badge. The 'blue-stripe' breast badge on right was issued to SPOs and possibly more senior officers.

The gold anchor at centre was worn by Customs Coxswains of the Marine Group as a collar rank whilst the 'Customs Coastwatch' gold wing breast badge was worn by Pilots of the Customs Coastwatch Unit. It depicts a map of Australia within the centre circle.

Top line left to right show the so-called 'Mary-Jane' cap badge issued for a short period during the late 1970s. Officers forced to wear it, scorned it, as the oak leaves beneath 'Customs' bore considerable resemblance to cannabis leaves, hence the nickname. Next is the smaller of the 1975 issue gilt buttons with the Coat of Arms of Australia. That is followed by a circular breast badge which was issued in 1975 to female members, it has a brooch clip at rear. That is followed by a larger button and then by the large metal QC badge which was issued only for use on wide-brimmed hats worn at northern ports in the early 1980s. Those badges were withdrawn in 1988 and Customs now have no metal cap or hat badges at all.



Photograph No. 12 shows an assortment of numbered breast badges from the post- 1980 era until 1998, as well as two wallet ID badges. There are obvious variations from different manufacturers, especially No. 2468 at centre which is markedly different from the others. The 'retired' badge is self-explanatory however no one appears to know anything about the ID wallet badge at centre right marked 'D1251'. The Customs Drug Detector Dog Unit has been eliminated and the Detection operations group is unlikely.



The tiepin on top left of Photograph No. 13 is standard issue however there are also official issue versions that are given out for long service. They start after 15 years service and then go up in increments of five years. The pin is identical to that shown however has the number, e.g. '15' in a small circle under the word 'Customs' on the badge. The top centre pin is from Coastwatch and the top right pin is marked 'Australian Customs Detector Dog Unit'. The lower badge is a variation of the Coastwatch pin.



The Australian Customs have used drug detection dogs since 1969 when a black Labrador ‘Captain’ was introduced with PO Barry Walker as his Handler. Subsequently the dog unit was the first to be issued with official specialist shoulder patches that were worn on their blue overalls. The patches were introduced in the mid to late 1970s and the first version was a predominantly blue, black and white circular, screen-printed ‘iron-on’ patch and featured a brown German Shepherd dog. The subsequent three patches were very similar. Patch number five was identical except now in the new ‘corporate colours’ of blue, red and white. The last and current version is similar but with one radical change, the featured dog is now a golden Labrador. This patch was introduced in 1998 and was a salute to the fact the Australia is acknowledged as breeding the best DD Dogs in the world and all are now Labradors. See Photograph No. 14.



Photograph No. 15 depicts a number of issue shoulder patches plus two prototypes awaiting official sanction. The top left patch was issued to Coastwatch flight crews and was brown to match their brown jackets. The white patch to it’s right was first worn by Customs athletes on their tracksuits at the 1988 International Law Enforcement Olympics held at Sydney, NSW in 1988. Customs teams have since worn it to other ILLOs at overseas locations with official approval.

The centre row depicts the series of patches worn from the late 1979’s to present day. The two camouflage prototype patches at bottom are currently under official consideration for issue to staff in remote areas.



The patches in Photograph No. 16 are all specialized patches and depict the evolution of the Coastwatch from an aerial service to a joint aerial and marine service. All of these patches were issued during the late 1980s and the 1990s with the top centre one (anchor and wings) being the latest. The patch depicting the Dugong is unique in that it may only be issued to Torres Strait Islanders employed by Customs. This mammal is protected by law with the exception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are allowed by law to hunt them as traditional food.

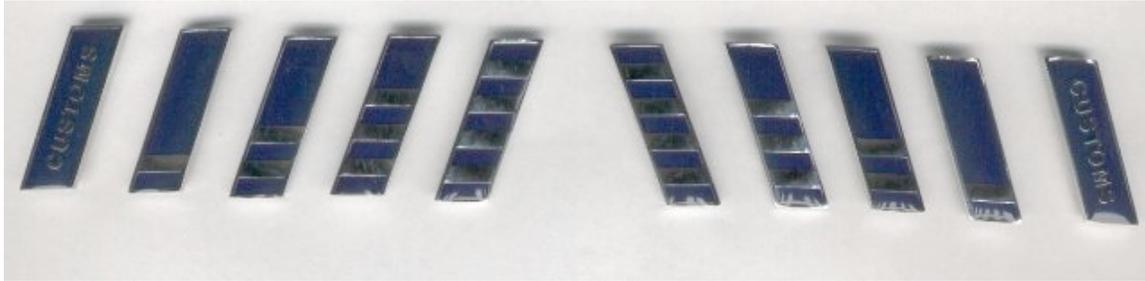
In 1998 another radical change in uniform occurred. All headwear (except baseball style caps with a cap patch and hard hats for ship search teams) were done away with. Officers were now issued with charcoal gray trousers, the belt depicted previously, plus a mid blue long sleeved shirt with a curved 'Customs' shoulder flash and the current 'Australian Customs' logo embroidered onto the left breast pocket, photograph No. 17 refers.



In another departure from Australian law enforcement tradition, the new uniform introduced US style collar rank badges. Photograph No. 18 shows from left to centre the collar badges identifying, firstly an Assistant Customs officer, then a Band One, then a Band Two, followed by Bands Three through to Band Six. One badge is worn on each collar.



Following staffing reform, those collar rank badges were withdrawn and replaced in 2000. Photograph No. 19 shows the new and current badges.



With many, many gaps in our knowledge, that now brings us to the present.

The Australian Customs has had many departmental hosts over the years however has only had a few changes of name since 1901, those being: Department of Trade & Customs, Department of Customs & Excise, Department of Police & Customs, Bureau of Customs and the current agency name, Australian Customs Service.

The historical data was mainly taken from photos and sketches in the excellent 2 volume official history of the Australian Customs written by David Day: 'Smugglers and Sailors'- covering the period 1788-1901 and 'Contraband and Controversy' covering the period 1901-1995.

Photographs Nos. 1 & 2 were kindly provided to the writer some years ago by Customs Public Relations Unit for an article printed in the 'ABC' magazine. John provides the rest of the photographs.

Both John De Belle and I actively solicit information and/or corrections to this article.