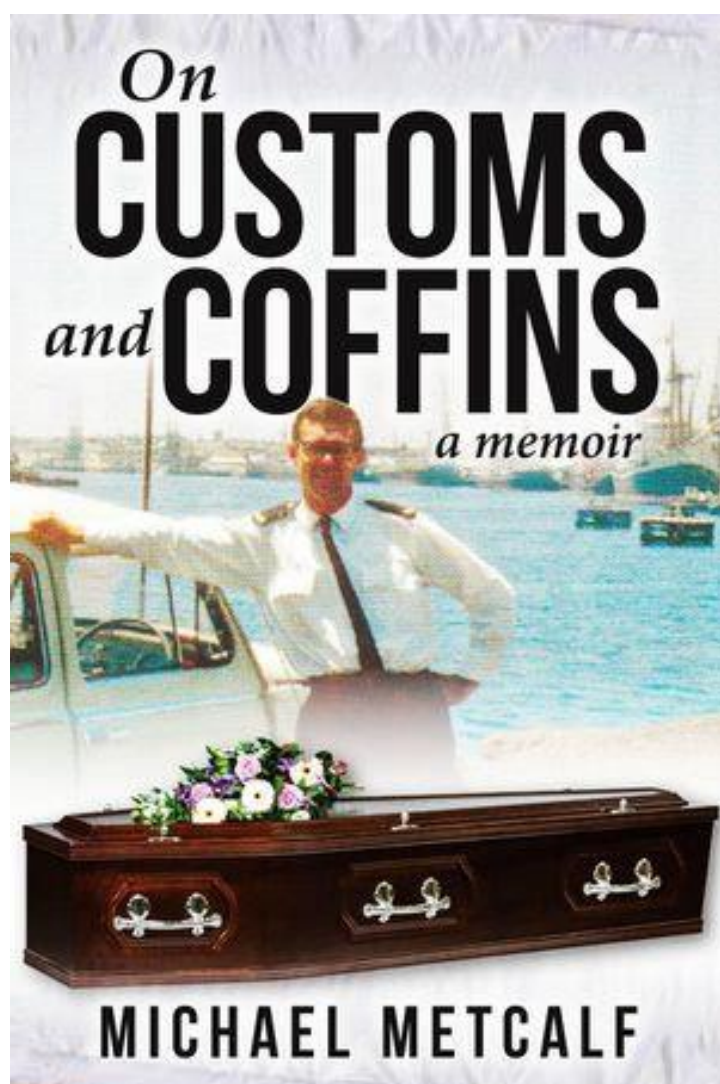


On CUSTOMS and COFFINS a memoir – Michael Metcalf

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Contents

Prologue – You bet I was!

Part One

What does a customs officer do?

Getting on the gravy train

A boy doing a man's job

Life amongst the wharfies

Go north, young man – Hedland and the Pilbara

Derby, Darwin and the Kimberley

Robyn

Working with the Royal Australian Navy

Married life and the best job in customs

Operation Basic – 1986

Not all the work was interesting

Part Two

And now for something a little bit different

The best job in the world

The best part of the best job in the world

Stress, what stress?

Partnerships are like all ships, and ships can sink

Partnership two – Oh no, not again!

The family funeral company – An obituary

Photo Section

Prologue

You bet I was!

The alarm rang relentlessly, rudely, loudly, aggressively and did not stop until I tumbled out of bed, crossed the bedroom floor and thumped the off switch. I had given up having the clock alongside the bed. Why? Because at 4:45 am I had a tendency to switch it off, roll over, and go back to sleep!

Yes, it was 4:45 am. Yes, it was cold. Especially in what we called 'the bunkhouse' at home where I slept. I need to drag the kerosene heater out of the house into the bunkhouse when I go to bed, I thought for the umpteenth time to my shivering self. I was going to work.

I had to be in Fremantle by 5:45 am in order to 'go afloat' at 6 am, to board in Gage Roads the majestic P&O liner, SS Oriana. She was first porting Fremantle, out from Southampton, and had come through the Suez Canal. The Peninsula and Orient Steam Navigation Company (P&O) had launched the Oriana in 1959. She had 2000 passengers and 900 crew, and was the nicest, fastest and most comfortable passenger ship that called at Fremantle.

Once I was out of bed it was better. After all, I was being paid overtime. I rugged up in uniform, appreciating the warm overcoat, headed for my little Renault 750 and managed to get it started. The choke was iffy so sometimes it took a while, but eventually it always started. From Hubert Street, East Victoria Park, I headed out on to Albany Highway, crossed over to Berwick Street, headed down to Canning Highway, then drove on direct to Fremantle.

Goodness it was black. The streetlights had been extinguished at 1:15 am. They always were. There was nary another car on the road, just a few odd lights on here and there. Not much happened in Perth after midnight and before sunrise in 1962!

I arrived in Fremantle, parked the car on the wharf and entered the customs house to sign on. I checked what duties I was on and then, with twenty or so of my fellow customs officers, walked across to the Victoria Quay B-shed landing to board the Lady Mitchell.

The Lady Mitchell was an 18-metre vessel used to take large parties of customs and immigration officials out to passenger ships. The conditions were ideal for boarding, and we were to sail out to Gage Roads to meet and board Oriana. As we cleared the harbour and turned north, dawn was breaking. Oriana's lights were visible coming over the horizon as she came to meet us at the boarding station at Fairway Buoy, located a few kilometres off Cottesloe Beach. P&O were always reliable, always on time. Oriana did, after all, carry the royal mail. Today, happily, it was fine, with just a bit of wind. It was the kind of morning when you thought to yourself, as you gazed out towards Rottnest Island to the west, or back to Australia, to the east: There's nowhere else I would rather be.

It wasn't always like that. Sometimes Lady Mitchell was crashing through waves and wind and rain. We always travelled standing out on deck. All weathers – it was just the done thing. And truthfully, it was better out there than it was stuck inside the accommodation. But today, boarding Oriana would be relatively straightforward.

We approached on her port side, circling around so we could nestle up against her alongside the 'gunport', through which we were boarding. This was really just a large doorway. The sea was calm because as always happens, Oriana provided us with a lee. We were on the calm side of the ship, and were protected from the waves normally sloshing down each side of the ship. These waves would have made Lady Mitchell rise and fall a metre or two and made our job a lot more difficult. But on the lee side of Oriana, Lady Mitchell was steady and motionless. There was a short climb up

the rope ladder, then we swung through the doorway to find that we were next to the kitchens, and were immediately enveloped by the evocative smells and sounds of food preparation. It could have been the curries for lunch, or just plain old English breakfast.

But we had work to do.

We followed the leader up several decks to the spacious lounge area, and started to set ourselves up to stamp the passports of the 2000 or so passengers who were either returning Aussie travellers, or Poms and other nationalities wanting to come to Australia to start a new life. (There weren't many black people, though. The White Australia policy was still alive and well!) But I didn't stamp passports. I was not yet trained for that. I was part of the team that collected the passenger cards after processing, and ticked their name off the ship's passenger list. The passenger cards were completed and handed in by each passenger when their passport was stamped. It was simple work, but it was wise not to miss anyone who had been through because this would result in the ships pursers madly running around trying to find the missing passenger, while the ship waited to start the day in port with its gangway still closed. When this happened, the passenger would eventually rock up, show his stamped passport, and all eyes would turn to us who were supposed to tick it off.

And then, after it was all finished, we might get a quick cup of white coffee and one of the famous P&O bacon and egg rolls.

I was nineteen years of age. I was doing interesting work no other nineteen-year-old in Australia was doing.

Was I enjoying myself immensely?

You bet I was!

Part One

What does a customs officer do?

It's amazing how a simple incident can change your life in the most incredible way. I can blame one man for the fact that I became a customs officer. His name was Colin Bungate, and I am eternally grateful to him.

I left Christian Brothers College, 1 St Georges Terrace, Perth, the site now occupied by the multi-storey Duxton Hotel, at the tender age of fourteen and a half. It was the end of 1957, and I had completed just two years of high school. I had done well in my first year, taught by Brother Geoffrey Seaman with whom I stayed in touch, and whose funeral I attended sixty-two years later. But I bombed out terribly in second year with Brothers Doyle and Molloy. Needless to say, I didn't go to their funerals!

The plan, hatched by my elder brother John, and my parents, was for me to leave school, get a job in the Post Master General (PMG)'s Department, and attend night school so I could pass the 'Commonwealth Third Division Clerical Exam'. The Commonwealth Public Service was divided into third and fourth divisions. Fourth division was limited in its promotional path but in third division you could go to the top, which appealed to me. I followed the plan to the letter, (except the going to the top part!) and it took me three years. In that first year, 1958, I was at age fifteen, too young to sit the exam. In the second year I passed English. During the third year I got serious, and started going to Miss Flynn's private classes. Miss Flynn charged hefty fees and made you work. Really work. When I sat the exam for the second time, I passed it, and from the many hundreds who sat for it,

achieved equal third place in the state. This, I must confess, was more a reflection of the level of the other candidates, than of my intellectual prowess, but don't tell them that! At the level of those placements, though, I was in good company, and I don't know whether it helped me get into customs, but it couldn't have done any harm.

As had been the plan, while going to night school I worked in PMG's department as the office boy in the accounts branch. My official title was 'junior postal officer' and I was the lowest of the low, and also the youngest – aged fourteen-and-a-half, through to seventeen-and-a-half by the time I finished. The work was what office boys did in those days: make the tea, get the lunches, open and distribute the mail, post the mail. I spent a lot of time in telephone accounts and 'posting the mail' involved folding by machine, enveloping and dispatching the invoices for all the telephones in WA. That kept me very busy. But I was getting paid. In 1959, my salary was \$578.00 on which I paid \$22.00 tax and received a tax rebate of \$6.20. I forget what I splurged my tax rebate on!

Having passed the clerical exam, I was to be posted to a third division position, not necessarily within PMG. Everybody said that Customs and Excise was by far the best department. It seemed that the main reason people thought this was that customs officers worked overtime, and thus were financially better off than most public servants, and of course it was very popular. It seemed that there were no positions available in customs, and I would be going to Centrelink or Social Security, as it was known then. But then my good luck kicked in. Colin Bungate had a clerk's position in customs, based in Perth, and he lived in Midland Junction, over 30 km away from Fremantle. He feared in those days the 'immense travel' involved in a transfer to Fremantle, where naturally there was a large customs staff, so he was applying to get out. He did not want to make the long train journey from Midland to Fremantle every day! In the end he did get a transfer to Social Security and I took his place in customs. I hope he enjoyed Social Security.

Colin, having vacated customs, left his position vacant, so I was able to slot in to it. Did my brother John, who had contacts, pull strings to put me at the head of the queue? I do not know. But having been told to prepare to move, I then started to wonder, what did the workers – no the 'officers' – actually do in customs? I didn't really know. It was down in Fremantle, and I hardly ever went there. I spoke with my PMG colleagues about it, but they didn't really know either.

'I have a Gazette... Let's look in that.'

The Gazette was the erstwhile government publication that advertised all the jobs in the public service and also publicised the various promotions on offer.

'Here's one for a position: the senior jerquer.'

'What's a jerquer?'

Nobody knew so I looked it up. It said, 'a customs officer who searches ships for contraband.' Well, that was not how the title was being used in this instance. In Customs and Excise the title was applied to the people who were like auditors. They checked everybody else's work. Much further down the road, I had a few weeks working in the jerquer's office. I hated it. But the word did appear again. Fremantle Ports, after they had delivered all the cargo off a ship, issued a 'jerque note', which listed surpluses and shortages, based on the actual tally of cargo off the ship, compared with the quantities shown on the ships manifest.

In May 1961 I started in the excise branch of Customs and Excise in the Perth customs house, 11–13 William Street Perth. In June 1961 my annual salary was \$906.00, my tax \$70.00 and my tax rebate \$18.00. I was very happy, although I didn't quite know what was ahead of me, except that I wasn't sure I wanted to be a jerquer!

What in fact was ahead of me for the next almost thirty years was mostly – certainly not always, but often – work that could only be described as unique. It was unique in society, and in some cases, unique in customs. It took me to all corners of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, along the coast and inland. I attended courses and visited Canberra, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. I met the young customs lady who became my wife. I travelled overnight on cargo and Navy ships on customs and Navy liaison business. I flew on helicopters and all sorts of small planes. I landed on an American aircraft carrier in a fixed wing aircraft. I boarded ships at sea, sometimes in very hazardous circumstances. I worked at Darwin airport, as well as Perth airport, where I held a number of positions including shift boss. And I grew to hate airports – a hatred that still exists today.

I experienced the transition from general cargo to ‘containerisation’, from passenger liners to jumbo jets, and from being concerned about watches being smuggled in, to being concerned about drugs being smuggled in. Along the way, I had many lovely long lunches at the Roma restaurant in Fremantle. Customs was a department with diverse responsibilities, not all of them exciting, so I was occasionally stuck in stultifyingly boring jobs with no work to do, and all day to do it, but that was the exception rather than the rule. In going north to work as a young single fellow, I earned lots of money, and living in government accommodation had minimal expenses. This financed my overseas travel, and ownership of an expensive-to-maintain Italian Alfa Romeo when I returned. I lived in Darwin for seven months, and my position there took me all around the Northern Territory.

I discovered that the ‘customs’ of Customs and Excise related to all port and border activities: shipping, aircraft, tariff, parcel post, cargo, immigration and passengers’ baggage. The ‘excise’ related to collecting tax on beer, spirituous liquors, cigarettes and tobacco, as well as petrol and diesel fuel. ‘Under-bond warehousing’ also featured, as the Northern Territory, along the coast and inland. I attended courses and visited Canberra, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. I met the young customs lady who became my wife. I travelled overnight on cargo and Navy ships on customs and Navy liaison business. I flew on helicopters and all sorts of small planes. I landed on an American aircraft carrier in a fixed wing aircraft. I boarded ships at sea, sometimes in very hazardous circumstances. I worked at Darwin airport, as well as Perth airport, where I held a number of positions including shift boss. And I grew to hate airports – a hatred that still exists today.

The department did change over the years to meet changing conditions in social and political circles. Today, in truth, it does not exist as it did in my day (which is perhaps a good reason for this book to be written!). It is barely a shadow of its former self. It has merged with the Immigration Department and all of its ‘excise’ tasks have gone over to the Taxation Department. What’s left seems to focus only on border protection, (and that includes protection from people!) examining baggage and searching ships. Paperwork was, if not ‘king’ in my day, at least very important. A lot of the work I did was exciting and interesting, and took place in varied locations, but it all boiled down to making sure the documentation was correct. Correct documentation, backed up by physical checks, was the foundation of our work. And as for computers: what were they again?

There was a lot of bureaucracy of those times, and strict hierarchies that existed within the organisation. When I joined, it was called The Department of Customs and Excise. The department had been established after Federation in 1901, when many new titles were invented to reflect the changing times and to differentiate us from UK customs, on which we were based. The ‘permanent head’ as he was known, had the title of ‘comptroller general’, and had various assistant CGs and deputy CGs. The boss of each state was called the ‘collector’ and he had under him senior assistant collectors and assistant collectors. ...

On CUSTOMS and COFFINS - Book Review

Hello Bernie and RCOA members,

I just finished reading Mike Metcalf's book. It was a very good read from start to finish. For somebody of my era (1990 to 2012), the book gave me an insight into the working life of a Customs Officer of Mike's era (1962 to 1989) that I never could have imagined. It's no exaggeration when I say that what Mike writes about the early days of his career, compared to my own early experiences 28 years later, are worlds apart. Priorities were different, and ways of getting the job done changed with the priorities.

Well, the world changes, so people's occupations change too, and Mike's book made me realise the impact such changes have on the occupation of Customs Officer, more so than many other occupations.

Of particular interest to me were Mike's reminiscences of his years in outports in WA and NT. Not only the work, but also the hardships, with housing and outport Customs Houses leaving a lot to be desired, unlike my own experiences in two district offices where I had very nice housing and working environments.

Mike talks about many officers whose names I had long forgotten, including some legends from his era who were gone before I joined, but came to hear of at some stage during my own time.

I also discovered the reason why a Quarantine Inspector and I, who were overnighing on board a Japanese-crewed tanker at sea off Dampier, were served a very tasteless Australian-style lunch, dinner and breakfast while the crew were enjoying Japanese-style meals that looked and smelt heavenly, but you'll have to read the book to find out why.

Post-Customs, Mike's and wife Robyn's changes of career to Funeral Directors is also very readable. It was here that I learnt something about toilet doors that I never knew. Again, for those that don't know, I won't spoil the story. I can confirm that it IS true, but if you feel that you must see for yourself, just be gentle.

Reading Mike's story will be a nostalgic trip down memory lane for Customs Officers of Mike's time and a fascinating insight into the life of a Customs Officer in the 60s, 70s and early 80s for those of us who came later, but I feel that what I will remember most about Mike's story is the enormous pride and satisfaction he has, and should always have, from having done two very different jobs so well.

Happy reading.

Ron Dyer