

Sydney's Port Operations and Communications Centre

The Waterways' Port Operations and Communications Centre Tower commands an overall view of most of the Port of Sydney, and has been nicknamed by some "The Pill" because it controls all the berths in Sydney Harbour!

Text and Photographs by Alan Bennett

Curious to find out more about this prominent Sydney landmark I went to Miller's Point, where the 4.9m diameter concrete shaft rises 87 metres to the control room. A short ride in the elevator and I was met by the Superintendent in charge Mr Cliff Purchase. His qualifications for the position are impeccable, which include a holding of a 'Master Unlimited' ticket. That entitles Mr Purchase to captain any size ship anywhere in the world. This knowledge is extremely important when the main task at the Communications Centre is to co-ordinate and assist these large vessels in a harbour that does not allow much room for error.

"Your on duty all the time. There are no breaks. Even if you go to the toilet you take your radio with you," Mr Purchase said from behind his desk.

A message comes through loudly on the two-way radio from a vessel sailing out towards the Sydney Heads. Mr Purchase replies and checks his paper work.



The Port Operations and Communications Centre has joined the harbour bridge as a distinct landmark on the harbour foreshore.

"Well, it's never boring over the Harbour. That's typical. Today the sky divers are going to dive into Darling Harbour, so we have to be aware of that. We get fireworks, yacht racing and after the Bicentenary I came out of here hoarse."

His responsibilities include the monitoring of shipping departures and arrivals, and co-ordinating them in a smooth and safe way. There are direct links with South Head Signal Station, police, fire brigade and other emergency services.

The appropriate authorities can then be called upon to deal quickly with incidents such as oil spillages and fires. The Communications Centre is also there to provide details of shipping movements, berths, arrivals and departures to the general public.

Mr Purchase picked up a card and inserted it into a clocking device on his desk. A loud click registered the position of a ship moving out towards Sydney Heads.

Vessels radio to the tower when they pass designated points – such as Bradleys Head and Fort Denison. The information stored on the card is then entered onto a computer. Using this system means that there is close monitoring of the positioning of all the vessels berthed and those undergoing manoeuvres.

“CLICK”, another sea going vessel passes a marker.

“You’ve arrived on a chaotic day. We have had six movements at once, which is very busy,” Mr Purchase said.

Although there is no visual contact with Botany Bay, shipping traffic is still controlled from the tower. Radar is constantly watching over the whole area. Over at the radar screen Mr Purchase points to a green speck on the display.

“That is a tanker anchored off Manly. He is waiting to come in.”



The view looking north towards the harbour bridge. At 84 meters above sea level there is excellent all round vision of the surrounding port.

A cross positioned over the green speck and a push of a button reveals the course and speed of the ship.

The Harbour and Botany Bay are busy shipping waters. The previous week the Port Operations and Communications Centre handled 65 movements on the Harbour and 62 at Botany.

Mr John Weekes, the port officer on duty, spoke into a microphone. He was giving the hourly radio service broadcast to inform vessels on wind direction and speed, water conditions, shipping movements and the expected time of arrival of the sky divers over Darling Harbour.

The Marine Superintendent and two port officers work a twelve hour shift, with a crew taking over for the following shift to continue an around the clock surveillance over the waterways.

It is quite easy to take the work of these officers for granted, but without them Sydney Harbour and Botany Bay would be a water traffic jam and likely to produce a maritime disaster in an area regarded as one of the most beautiful stretches of water in the world.