



**Submission No 1**

**Inquiry into RAAF F-111 Deseal/Reseal Workers and their Families**

**Name: Mr Paul McCulloch**

**Kerley, Margot (REPS)**

**From:** Gaspar, Sonya (REPS) on behalf of Committee, JSCFADT (REPS)  
**Sent:** Monday, 2 June 2008 12:32 PM  
**To:** Ali, Muzammil (REPS); Jeanroy, Paul (REPS); Kerley, Margot (REPS); Nothard, Paul (REPS)  
**Subject:** FW: parliamentary inquiry into the RAAF's F-111 Deseal/Reseal maintenance program

FYI

-----Original Message-----

**From:** [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Monday, 2 June 2008 12:28 PM  
**To:** Committee, JSCFADT (REPS)  
**Subject:** parliamentary inquiry into the RAAF's F-111 Deseal/Reseal maintenance program

Hello,

I was involved in the deseal/reseal program from August 1982 until April 1984. My roles differed from week to week depending on the workload but generally involved the following:

- Work inside F-111 forward and aft tanks, weapons bay tanks. Desealing and resealing.
- Wing fuel tank resealing and desealing
- Grit blasting wing tanks.
- Disposal of SR51 chemical
- Mixing of sealant compounds

I was 19 years of age when I was posted to DSRS. I spent 8 months working in another section which was due to be disbanded. Even though I hadn't been at Amberley very long I was already aware of the reputation that DSRS had and dreaded being transferred there. It was common knowledge that the chemicals used were dangerous and the work environment was horrible. I worked with colleagues that had been to DSRS and had seen some of the symptoms they were dealing with.

During my time at deseal I witnessed my work colleagues being dragged unconscious from fuel tanks. We used chemicals to clean sealant from our skin and usually went into tanks with very little protection. When you arrived at DSRS you pretty much took the existing culture as the norm. The only protection you were asked to wear was coveralls, which were really designed to keep your clothes clean. As they were made of cotton, they would absorb fuel residue and other chemicals so it was not uncommon for you to be "wet" with chemicals. I also was involved with the disposal of a chemical called SR51. It was an awful smelling chemical which would "attack" the back of your throat with its pungent smell. I was asked to join a team of workers to mow the lawn around the chemical dam, a place where SR51 would be disposed of. It wasn't normally our job to do this but work was slow and it needed doing. I remember protesting to my Warrant Officer because we were being asked to do something that kept us close to the chemical SR51 without any protection for a long period of time. It was around 40 degrees that day. I remember being told simply to do what I was told or be charged. This was very much the culture when anything was said regarding safety issues. It was seen as trying to get out of a horrible job.

My health has been reasonable in comparison to many of my work colleagues. I have a skin condition which comes and goes and have been tested for memory loss. I have struggled over many years at times with trying to get my mind functioning. I originally put it down to memory loss and went for my testing. The Psychologist told me I didn't have a problem with memory loss but did say I possibly had another condition which would account for my problems. Because I was there under the pretence of memory loss that was all he could respond to. He also mentioned he thought I had been in and out of mild depression.

This has been a major concern for me in my workplace. I have good weeks and bad weeks. I will be working on a project and turn to do something and then my thought process is gone. It may be minutes before I can get back on track with a thought or conversation. Sometimes I will sit in my office just staring at the wall, trying to get something started in my mind so I can get on with work but nothing comes. It's like a black hole. It's incredibly frustrating. Fortunately my workplace is very understanding but it is a concern for me. My future is always in the back of my mind. I know it concerns my family as I see it in their eyes when I am "lost". I don't know what it is and I don't know if it's covered under the DSRS scheme. I also have a tendency to be anti social and just want my own time which frustrates my wife incredibly. I had always been a very social person. I think this is common to many desealers.

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One of the problems for desealers is we are not proactive in getting help. I think one of the factors is our conditions contribute to a reluctance to be proactive but also frustrations with Veterans Affairs. After seeing the Psychologist I basically went home and that was the last I heard. Nothing has changed since before I went to him other than he said I don't have memory loss. I have no idea how to follow this up. I have applied to Vet Affairs for other conditions not associated with deseal and had some approved. I applied to have my knees covered because of the extensive lifting and squatting I had to do in the RAAF. Vet Affairs covered my left knee but not my right knee. They gave no reason for only covering one, although I suspect it may have been because whilst in the RAAF I had an operation on my Left Knee (covered). I questioned the logic behind the decision to only cover one knee and was told that if I pursued an appeal every thing else I was covered for would come under scrutiny and I would possibly lose all other benefits. This has discouraged me from pursuing anything with Veterans Affairs. I would have been happy to be openly honest with them about my conditions and accept their explanations but placing conditions on genuine enquiries of a threatening nature only serves to rob people of their confidence in the organisation.

To be really honest I was very appreciative of the ex-gratia payment in recognition of the conditions we worked in. They were horrible conditions. However it isn't compensation nor does it come close to being compensation for the many conditions we face and the impact they have on our future. Most Australians have an expectation of good health. We have an expectation of "it's only a matter of time". Why do we have this? Because we have seen our colleagues slowly die, we have seen their struggles with illness and we know our own struggles. It makes me angry that we have to fight so hard for compensation after it has been officially acknowledged that the RAAF was negligent in its duty of care to hundreds of workers. Workers like myself who at 19yrs of age had no union to protect me, superior officers who didn't protect me and a system that was heavily weighted towards "do as you are told".

I volunteered to go to the Sinai just before my stint in DSRS. I was willing to go anywhere for my country. I was asked to go into F-111 fuel tanks because that was needed and I did that too. I was told I was needed for this job and so I, like many others did what we were asked to do. But now the job is done we have been left to fight for ourselves, struggling with bureaucratic red tape and promises. We give 700 Australians with significant health problems and an uncertain future \$21million dollar and give Burma \$25million dollars. We have a Budget surplus and still refuse to look after those who have given their quality of life and peace of mind for the Australian Government. Seriously, what have we received in return for our sacrifice other than health problems?

What would you consider doing if your own father, husband, wife, son or daughter was suffering with their health because they were put at "acknowledged" risk by their employer? Would you simply sit back and let it drag on like is happening to Desealers now? There is a real sense that if we were dealing with a civilian organisation and not a Government one then this wouldn't be dragging on like it is. The Governments moral integrity is really under questions here.

I want to know that my future health needs will be looked after without being a burden on my family. I want to be able to access those services without having to perform criteria that are difficult to fulfil because of the nature of my conditions. I want some financial compensation so I can invest for the future, because my future is more uncertain as a result of my time in DSRS.

Regards

Paul McCulloch  
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