



Submission No 17

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

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Dear Sir/Madam

Re: SUBMISSION FOR F-111 DESEAL/RESEAL PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRY

Background

1. My name is Amanda Joy Grady. I am the wife of David Grady, an ex RAAF employee who worked in the tanks of the F-111s doing the thankless task of desealing and resealing the fuel tanks in the late 1970's and early 1980's.
2. David left the RAAF and completed his Higher School Certificate through TAFE. I met David at the University of New England in 1984 where he was undertaking a Bachelor of Science Degree and me a Bachelor of Natural Resources. David was energetic, enthusiastic, intelligent and a highly motivated person. We both left U.N.E. and started studying surveying in Sydney in 1986 and we were married in 1988. David often talked about his time in the RAAF. We were not aware of the profound effect these few years were to have on our future lives together.
3. David kept in touch with a few RAAF friends but basically began a whole new life which was totally removed from the RAAF. David completed his Surveying higher Certificate, further studied at Uni for Surveying and civil engineering, did a Post Graduate degree in Land Economy and became a qualified Strata Manager.
4. The first signs of David's future health problems appeared in the late 1980's - early 1990's while working in Lithgow, NSW. He visited many doctors who all treated his endless coughing as Asthma. Each doctor prescribing new medications, none of which seemed to make any difference. David was starting to show signs of moodiness which I put down to tiredness and living in Lithgow. We started our own surveying company after David sat for his Board Exams and became a Registered Surveyor and moved back to the Central Coast of NSW. The chest problems did not abate and what I now realise were signs of depression were appearing. He was now showing extreme reactions to perfumes, solvents, paints etc and started drinking. Eventually David resigned as Executive Director of Gratin Asia Pacific, a very successful joint venture company which he set up to serve the Telecommunications Industry. We had a beautiful house in Gosford and because of David's declining health, we lost the house and almost everything we owned.
5. We moved to QLD where David took up a senior position with Thiess. David's endless coughing continued and he seemed to be tired all the time. We had no idea what the problem was and put it down to the long hours he was working. He would sleep all weekend and when not asleep he was coughing and drinking. He was very difficult to talk to and very distant from myself and the children.

6. David left Thiess in 2001 and began work at Boeing as a contract administrator, thinking he just needed a change. His health did not improve, but seem to decline and he resigned from this position as well.

Terms of Reference (in italics)

"The committee will investigate and review claims for compensation from former F-III deseal/reseal workers including the Commonwealth's response to the health and support needs of former F-III Deseal/Reseal workers and their families. The Committee should ascertain whether the response was adequate, whether it was consistent with the findings of the Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP) and whether the overall administration and handling of the program was adequate"

I do not agree Commonwealth's response to the health and support needs of former F-III Deseal/Reseal workers and their families was adequate, nor do I believe the overall administration and handling of the program was acceptable. The following paragraphs relate to this:

7. In 2003 David was invited to a RAAF reunion and it was there he found out that there were questions being asked relating to health problems and the maintenance of the F-111 fuel tanks. I don't know if this was a good or bad thing. Yes, it was good to know there was a reason for David's behaviour and health problems but the way David has been treated and the rapid decline in his mental health because of it I sometimes wish we had never heard about Deseal/Reseal.
8. From 2002 to mid 2006 my family's life was chaos.
9. Throughout 2004 and 2005 we attended Deseal/Reseal meetings out at Amberley. After each meeting David would be full of hope only to come crashing down when nothing happened. The Chief of Air Force Angus Houston even told us at one meeting that it would be advisable for us to get financial advice because of the large amount of money which would be offered to those who had been exposed and were suffering health problems because of it. This was at a time when David was becoming very depressed and was finding hard to work full time. It seemed that we would be OK, that David would be able to take the time he needed to get better. We were considering lodging our own claim against the Commonwealth but thought there would be no need.

"The Inquiry will consider the adequacy and equity of the financial element of the Ex Gratia Scheme and whether it was consistent with (i) the findings of SHOAMP, (ii) the Health Care Scheme response (iii) the Tier definitions, and (iv) one off payments to other veteran groups. The Inquiry will consider, but not be limited to:

- *Whether the lump sums available under the ex gratia scheme were appropriate;*
- *Whether the lump sums available were appropriate given the findings of the SHOAMP;*
- *Whether the lump sums, when considered along with the benefits available under the Health Care Scheme, were appropriate;*
- *Whether the lump sums available under the ex gratia scheme were appropriate, when considered along with the full range of benefits and compensation available under other Commonwealth or State statutory schemes;*
- *Whether the lump sums were consistent with the definitions of Tiers of participants;*
- *Whether the lump sums were consistent with other one-off payments made to veteran groups;*
- *When assessing the question of adequate remedies whether regard should be given*

to the establishment of a dedicated administrative assessment and settlement scheme, and

•If the lump sums available under the ex-gratia scheme are not considered to be financially adequate, discuss what compensatory payment would be appropriate in light of the SHOAMP findings, other one-off payments made to veteran groups, and the full range of benefits and compensation available under other Commonwealth and State statutory schemes or common law damages available under Australian law"

I do not consider the adequacy and equity of the financial element of the Ex Gratia Scheme to be acceptable at all or that the Tiers of definition were appropriate given that:

10. When we were advised that the lump sum amount was to \$40,000, not \$400,000 it was a shock. Worse was to come for us. David lodged his claim along with copies of supporting paperwork he had kept all these years. We were confident, and could see no reason why he would be denied. Considering the inadequacy of the amount offered, we decided then that we would proceed with our own legal action and used the inheritance from my Grandmother to fund it.
11. This was the start of the worst 3 years of my life.
12. The way we were treated by the Department of Veterans Affairs led David into a downward spiral. The paperwork David submitted was apparently not evidence enough and Statutory Declarations were now needed. Although we were stunned by this David immediately submitted 2 Statutory Declarations and was told that this would be the final hurdle. It wasn't. We received no progress reports and my seemingly endless phone calls to the helpline set up specifically for this purpose went unanswered. My workmates would place bets on whether I'd get an answer or a return phone call. We were then told that David's records had been lost and he would need to show more evidence to prove he did the job. Did he have a photograph while doing descal reseal work! At one stage I was told his claim was OK and had been passed to the Ministers office for the final signature. Another lie. David had 12 months of having his hopes raised then dashed. After the first few times I stopped believing anything they told me. It hurt me too much to get my hopes up. What hurt more was to see David's mental health decline so rapidly as a result of all this. If DVA had not been so insensitive or unsympathetic in their approach to David's claim there would not be a need to write this submission.
13. During this time our children had to witness the effects of depression, mood swings and alcoholism every day. Our children had to cope with coming home from school to find their father had tried to kill himself. They drew further away from David because his mood swings and depression made it impossible for them to discuss problems they were having. We lived with the constant worry that David would try to harm himself.
14. David was basically called a liar by the Government. Do DVA realise what their antics did to someone in such a fragile state of mind? The children and I had many sleepless nights. I would lay awake just in case David got up in the night and tried to harm himself. DVA have shown no regard for the legitimate claimants and their families. The very people they are supposed to be supporting.
15. We lived a life totally alien to one you would experience and still do. On top of the mental health problems David has reactions to food colourings, flavourings, preservatives, perfumes, solvents, cleaning products, paint, pollens, cigarette smoke.....

Just think, is there anywhere you go outside of your home where you don't come across one of these? On some occasions he has ended up in bed for days because someone standing next to him was wearing perfume. The children had to let friends know not to wear strong perfumes or deodorants to our house. In the end, with David's state being so unpredictable our children stopped inviting friends to the house.

"The Inquiry will consider the adequacy and equity of the Health Care Scheme in meeting the health and support needs of participants and their families and whether this was consistent with the SHOAMP findings..."

"The Inquiry will consider whether the overall handling and administration of ex gratia and compensation claims was appropriate, timely and transparent for both participants and their families. The Inquiry will consider whether, but not be limited to:

- Cross agency cooperation was effective;*
- The documentation and records held by both Agencies as they relate to Deseal/Reseal activities was adequate;*
- The standard of evidence required to substantiate a claim was reasonable and, if not, whether alternative standards of proof may be used when making an eligibility determination;*
- There has been equitable treatment of service personnel, public servants, civilian employees and contractors involved in Deseal/Reseal activities;*
- Staffing resources were adequate to produce a timely result;*
- There were unreasonable delays in the process, taking into account the complex nature of issues; and*
- The overall handling and administration of ex gratia and compensation claims was appropriate and timely"*

As I mentioned before, I do not consider the overall handling and administration of ex gratia and compensation claims or the Health Care Scheme was appropriate or adequate, I do not consider them timely or transparent. The documentation and records held by both Agencies as they relate to Deseal/Reseal activities has proved to be inadequate, as stated in paragraph 12 of my submission. Staffing resources were inadequate to produce a timely result and there were unreasonable delays in the whole process, this also led to the following:

16. David's bowel problems were becoming worse. He would frequently bleed or have diarrhoea. David underwent testing and found that he had the onset of Crohns disease and had numerous polyps removed from his bowels. When I asked if any further testing would be done to monitor his bowels I was told by the F-111 Health Care Scheme that because no cancer was detected no further testing would be recommended. I was stunned. Whenever he suffered a bout of these bowel or lung problems the drinking and mood swings would increase, only exacerbating his health problems. The physical health problems can be managed, but it is the unseen mental problems which cause the most angst for the family. I would leave work each night not knowing what state David would be in when I got home. I would call the kids before I left to find out if I needed to be careful or if he was happy. I don't know all the details of every letter and knock-back David received from the Government I just know that whenever he said a letter from DVA had arrived I feared the worst. David's condition would deteriorate markedly. I tried to keep everything as 'normal' as possible for our children.
17. I only left David alone when I had to.

18. I am not normally one to speak out or be pushy but when you are desperate it's amazing what you are capable of. During this time I confronted then Minister for Defence Brendan Nelson while he was attending a Vietnam Veterans memorial in Cleveland and the then Prime Minister John Howard when he visited Ormiston College. John Howard seemed to have no knowledge of what I was talking about. Brendan Nelson however was very supportive. His staff kept in contact with me, keeping updated of David's condition. He was almost apologetic for what was happening to us. I can't speak highly enough of the support we were initially given by Mr Nelson and his staff. However, in the end this also was a great letdown and proved futile as Mr Nelson's office did not follow through with their assistance the way I thought they would. We were left without help again.
19. David was working less and our financial problems were increasing. There seemed to be no end in sight. We had to sell our home. But I'm sure if David was in a better state of mind we could have worked things out. No one could talk to David and he lost his trust in everyone. We couldn't plan for our future, we were in limbo and DVA couldn't care less.
20. David hit rock bottom in August 2006 when he made a serious attempt on his life. He called me at work one afternoon saying "you're a wonderful mother. Goodbye". The police searched for David, locating him the next day. He was taken to the psych wing at Redlands hospital and after an hour I was asked to take him home. I refused and insisted that he not be sent home until he had received proper treatment. He needed psychiatric care which the children and I should not have been expected to provide. The children and I also needed time to heal.
21. It was Vietnam Veterans support which helped us at this time, not DVA. DVA advised us they would visit David at New Farm Clinic to advise him about his claim. You know it's not going to be good news when they advise him to have his doctor there for support. I also attended thinking I should be there to support David. I ended up being the one who needed the support. I couldn't believe they treated us as liars, that all we had been through was for nothing. I told them this and was told they didn't think David was lying to them about doing deseal/reseal work. They said he obviously did do the job but he "didn't fit the criteria". He wasn't part of a deseal/reseal program. It's hard to be part of a specific program when it hadn't even been set up when he was doing the job!!!!
22. Since David left hospital in September 2006 he has continued to struggle with depression and constant health problems. The medications he is on makes him very distant and noncommunicative. We have been able to cope better by putting DVA and the Deseal/Reseal saga at the back of minds. We try to not think about it and get on with our lives the best we can. It is very hard for us financially with the reduced hours David needs to work. It is still very hard to plan for our future but concentrate on one day at a time. I hope that this time we may see a result and I hope that there will be no more unkept promises.
23. David is an intelligent person, a wonderful father, a hard worker and ridiculously honest. The government seemed to be trying their hardest to destroy all this. The exposure to chemicals was the trigger for David's health problems but the way we have been lied to and treated has accelerated the decline of David's health. It has been a roller coaster ride which I wish we had never got on. It would have been better not to know than go through what we have. I almost feel embarrassed about how I believed

what we were told at the start. It all seemed to be so straight forward at the start. How could it be so hard? And how could DVA be so callous?

24. The hardest thing for me is how can someone admit that the chemicals have caused health problems and most likely cut short people's lives and then make it so hard for these people to get help and closure. David volunteered to do this task and did his job without complaining.

Conclusion

To write this, reliving the last 15 years has been extremely painful and emotional process. We are still in limbo and I just want to be able to get on with our lives. I hope that you, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade can finally be of assistance in your recommendations to the Government and perhaps we, as a family, can finally have some form of closure to the most horrendous period of our lives that was and is Deseal/Reseal.

Yours faithfully,



AMANDA JOY GRADY
Wife of former RAAF F-111 deseal/reseal worker.

17 June 2008

