



Submission No 63

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

Name: Mr Garth Steinhardt

Submission to Parliamentary Sub-Committee F-111 DESEAL/RESEAL (DSRS) INQUIRY

Submitted By:

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Ex Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Member

RAAF Mustering - Aircraft Surface Finisher (ASURFIN) "Painter"

DSRS Program - Tier 1 Exposure Recipient

Exposure Period – 1979 to 1981

Introduction / Background

I enlisted into the RAAF in March 1978 from a small country town in South East Queensland. After undergoing basic training in Adelaide South Australia, I was posted / transferred into Number 3 Aircraft Depot (3AD) at RAAF Base Amberley in Queensland, to undergo Surface Finishing Training. Then in February 1979, on completion of my training, I was permanently posted / transferred into 3AD.

The period from February 1979 to January 1981 I worked in 3AD as a Surface Finisher (military mustering / trade abbreviation SURFIN) the civilian equivalent being an automotive / industrial Spray Painter. The trade / mustering was more commonly referred to or known as the "Painters". Later on the mustering had a name change to Aircraft Surface Finisher (ASURFIN).

The work role Painters performed inside the tanks was conducted immediately after the Deseal / Reseal (DSRS) process had been completed. Sometimes only hours after the DSRS crew had finished. The most vivid memory of this activity was the overwhelming stench that remained in the tanks after the DSRS process had been conducted.

Inside F111 Aircraft Fuel Tanks – Work Role / Activity

It was the "Painters" job to prepare the internal surfaces of the F111 fuel tanks for refinishing and repainting. This consisted of:

- Sanding the existing surface coating so as to abrade the surface to ensure that subsequent paint coatings would adhere to it.
- Once sanded the surfaces were cleaned with an alkaline wash and then, if required, cleaned with a solvent cleaner usually Methyl Ethel Keytone (MEK) or a Military Specification solvent.
- The preparation phase also included the treating of any exposed alloy surfaces with a chemical solution known as Deoxidine 624 (Phosphoric Acid) and then with a chemical conversion coating, Alodine 1200S (chromic acid) and;
- Once dry the internal surfaces of the tanks were then resprayed / repainted with a 2 pack Epoxy Primer coating (PRC 1560).

There were times when all that was required were small repairs to various areas inside the fuel tanks where the existing coating had started to break away and peel off. The repairs were carried out using the same process as detailed above only on a much smaller scale.

Duration of Activity – Inside F111 Fuselage Tanks

From memory a complete F111 Fuselage fuel tank repaint program (both front and rear tanks) would take the Paint Shop Surface Finishing crew approximately 10 to 15 working days to complete. The time taken to do touch up work and repairs inside the tanks was dependant on the size and number of repairs but could take anywhere between 3 to 5 days to complete, even longer in some cases.

During my period of employment in the 3AD Paint Shop I worked on a number of these fuselage tank repaint programs and was involved in the spot repair & touch up work inside the tanks on numerous occasions.

Board of Inquiry (BOI) & Health Study

The exposure of Painters to the chemical cocktails used in the DSRS process and then in the refinishing of the fuselage fuel tank surfaces was clearly established in the Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP) Vol 2 Mortality and Cancer Incidence Study Interim Report July 2003 that tasks carried out by Painters was defined by the BOI as a category 1 based on exposure.

Based on my exposure and duration spent inside the fuel tanks easily I met the criteria (of 30 working days inside F111 fuel tanks) required for the \$40,000 Tier 1 Lump Sum ex-gratia payment, which was subsequently paid to me based on my exposure.

On-Going Health Issues – Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA)

As a result the F111 Deseal / Reseal (DSRS) Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP) I submitted a claim to DVA for the following health issues, which to this point I have self managed and have to some extent learned to cope / live with them, they are as follows:

- **Memory Loss** – I once had a very good memory where I could recall names dates, facts and figures at will. My long-term memory seems to be fine in most circumstances I can remember incidents, people and dates from years ago. However, I now have difficulty and struggle with remembering short-term things such as names, dates, facts and places.
- **Bouts of Lethargy and Fatigue** – I suffer for no evident reason bouts of lethargy and fatigue. At times I struggle to "Get Going" and feel like just sitting down and sleeping. The lethargy is the worst of the two in that you feel fine but cannot muster the energy to pick your self up and make a start. I seem to manage the fatigue factor all right I just curl up somewhere out of the way and have a sleep. When I am actually undertaking an activity I seem to become fatigued very quickly and want to give the task away.

Health Issues – Affecting Employment

As stated above, up to this point in time I have self managed these disabilities. However, I have had incidents at work that due to fatigue I have not been able to complete tasks or meet deadlines and there have been occasions where I have had Sick Days off with bouts of lethargy / fatigue loss of energy etc.

To the best of my recollection the loss of short-term memory has at this stage had only a minor adverse affect on my employment. As in the past I could remember names, dates & facts I now have to write everything down and force my self to keep going back over them to recall important dates, facts, names etc. Personally it is very frustrating and makes me extremely mad when I cannot remember simple dates and facts when in the past I had an excellent memory and could remember everything without hesitation.

Suffering

With the onset of periods of decreased energy and fatigue coupled with the loss of my short term memory they all affect my ability to cope and deal with everyday issues. My bouts do not tend to completely restrict me to the point where I cannot function but is severe enough to cause me concern / distress / frustration (I can get very irritable & angry at times) and it impacts directly on my life, my family, and those that rely on me both on the home front and at work. I feel at times guilty for being so unreliable especially when it comes to my family and loved ones.

My concentration at work is poor and I find it difficult to maintain my focus for extended periods which at times in a work setting can be extremely embarrassing. The feeling of being unwell all the time can be in its self be enough to make you not want to get out of bed in the morning and face another day. The symptoms never seem to go away just the severity of the bouts.

Whilst at work when experiencing these periods I try to get out of the office and go for a walk, at home I lie down and have a rest. The length of these periods is dependant on the severity of the symptoms but I need time to recover regardless of the severity.

Loss of Mobility

Again during periods of fatigue my mobility is effected as I do not have the "Get up & Go" to do things I used to do especially with my family. I do not undertake any extended car trips but when I do I have to plan into our schedule regular breaks & stops so as to fight off any possible fatigue periods, not always successful. Extended shopping trips or outings are now a battle, especially where a lot of standing around is involved, regular "Sit Down" have a rest periods are required. Not that I want too but I have had to sit outside the shops whilst my wife does the family shopping on her own.

Affect on Social Relationships and Leisure Activities

My social group extends only to my immediate family bouts of fatigue, memory loss and my pre-existing (recognized DVA Service Related condition File Number QSM20681) problem of reoccurring headaches makes it very difficult for me to actively engage with people outside of my immediate family, who do not know of nor understand my health problems. I sometimes feel defective as a person and have always tried to down play my conditions when in a social setting.

I avoid social functions especially those where you are required to enter into small talk / light conversation, normally work related, where I find it difficult to remember non relevant facts brought up in general conversation, this can be very embarrassing in mixed company where people judge you on first impressions.

Prior to the conditions I had an active social life outside my immediate family, playing tennis, touch football, trips to the local football games, nights out at the local clubs, dinner & social functions and a network of friends. This has all but disappeared I NO longer play tennis or touch football and the only nights out I now spend are with my wife, as she understands my situation. Sport / exercise are now restricted to walking sessions.

I used to read books especially personal biographies but that is now a thing of the past as my concentration is not what it was and I now find it difficult to concentrate for extended periods. My reading is now restricted to magazines and newspaper articles which I can finish in a short time span.

This lack of social interaction has also had a negative impact on my marital harmony (I get irritable & short tempered at times) as we are always with each other. All of this has had an impact on my relationship with my wife and as a result of it comes a sex life which has diminished in its frequency and intimacy.

Health Concerns – Fellow Workers

Although I suffer from the health issues as detailed above and have to the best of my ability tried to paint a picture of how they impact on my life, I feel very lucky when compared with the type of illnesses that my former co-workers, employed in the F-111 Fuel Tank Deseal / Reseal program are now suffering from.

I have witnessed healthy, strong, young men (some of whom have since passed away) who proudly served their country are now terribly sick from illnesses that have all been linked to chemical exposure and the F-111 Deseal Reseal program. Their quality of life is poor with no positive long term outlook or solution to their health concerns.

Their only crime was to loyally serve their country as proud military members and to do as they were ordered to do, enter the F-111 Fuel tanks and work with a cocktail of chemical solutions that has now ruined their health and their lives.

Frustration – Health Claims

I understand the need for a through examination of all health claims submitted to DVA but the bureaucrat "Paper System" coupled with the process of shuffling you off to different doctors for assessments only adds another layer of complexity and frustration to the whole process of submitting claims.

There is a strong feeling among ex-servicemen that the DVA health claim system is designed in such a way that you become so angry and frustrated with the whole process that you simply give up.

To add another level of complexity to the issue there are a number of different compensation acts that apply, depending on when the exposure occurred. In my particular circumstance my exposure was during the period 1979-1981, which meant that I fall under two different comprehension schemes the Veterans' Entitlement Act and the Safety Rehabilitation and Compensation Act (SRCA) both administered by DVA.

I submitted a claim to both organisations for the health issues as detailed in this submission, after being assessed by the DVA selected Doctor's their findings were that I was suffering from Dsythymic Disorder.

DVA has refused to accept this illness (Dythymic Disorder) as service related but SRCA has. To confuse the issue even further DVA has amended my health care card (White Card) to cover Dsythymic Disorder treatments but does not accept the condition as being service related.

Conclusion

To right the wrongs of the past and to provide those ex-serving RAAF members, whose health and well being is in jeopardy, with a level of confidence that the government of the day will continue to support them in their hour of need. Automatically issue to those Deseal Reseal Tier 1 Exposure Recipients a DVA Gold Card to cover ALL health care costs, now and into the future.

The current battle you have to go through to have your illnesses recognised and covered by DVA only adds to the overall stress of this sad saga.

Compensation can then be addressed on an individual basis.

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