



# **Supplementary Submission 5a**

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

**Name: Mr Barry Gray**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY  
INTO F111 DS/RS WORKERS  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, BRISBANE  
28 JULY 2008  
(Submission No 5 – Barry Gray)

MY BACKGROUND

On 11 Jul 1966 I joined and served in the RAAF for 20 years, my last posting being as Warrant Officer Engineer on F111s at 1 Sqn Amberley. After recruit and trade training I was posted to RAAF Amberley 3AD in May 67 as an Afmech. After further training as an Affitt I was posted to 82 Wing Amberley in Feb 68.

By this stage 82 Wing was building up to accept delivery of the F111 aircraft during which time I was working normal duties on Canberra acft and completing the necessary F111 courses.

HISTORY: WORKING ON F111 AIRCRAFT

The logistical plan was to deploy PAI teams consisting of various musterings to McClellan AFB USA, to carry out acceptance inspections of the fleet prior to the RAAF accepting delivery of the aircraft. I was on the first team consisting of a commissioned Officer and 6 other airmen and we departed on 19 Aug 68. After a short period at McClellan AFB we transferred to Edwards AFB to accept the first F111 flying in from the official handover ceremony to the RAAF from GD at Fort Worth.

Following the arrival we did the inspection and worked with a scientist from ARL (so far as I can recall) doing ground testing for flight data to estimate attitude/fuel consumption of the acft for their ferry back to Amberley.

During our deployment at Edwards AFB a wing fell off a USAF F111 resulting in the entire fleet of F111s being grounded indefinitely. Discussions were then held resulting in the doubt of the aircrafts immediate delivery and the future of the acft. Our acft at Edwards was given flight clearance to return to GD and parked there with the rest of our fleet on the tarmac for some years, exposed to the harsh elements. Eventually a decision eventuated that a major modification had to be made to the WCTB, resulting in the F111 delivery programme being postponed. Along with the aircrew training in USA we flew back to Amberley in Nov 68.

Several years later when the first 6 F111s arrived at Amberley in June 73 we at 82 Wing were in the process of returning the F4E Phantoms that were on lease from the USAF. The F111s arrived in four groups of sixes over a period of months and were parked on the tarmac in the sun and extreme cold and brought into service as defects were repaired. In Feb 74 we were all internally posted to 482 Squadron servicing as a maintenance and flight line Squadron for aircrews from both 1 & 6 Squadrons.

It was soon evident after arrival of the acft that reverted sealant was leeching out between the acft skin, panels and rivets and fuel leaks started to appear, in some cases severe running leaks. On investigation of the problem it was thought that exposure of the acft to the heat from the tarmac and sun, at times 50c, was causing the faying surface sealant to revert to a natural state.

A possible solution was to build car ports (as they were known) to help arrest the sealant break down. This was only a stop gap but it did not help as the sealant was beyond restoration. The amount of leaks was so intensive that it adversely affected flying commitments for both 1&6 Squadron aircrew sorties.

Acft were leaking fuel from wings and fuselage and in some case we adjusted the fuel loading on the acft to prevent the leaks from continuing. Squadron

commanders were aware of the leak problem and accepted the fuel loads so as to maintain flying hours for the aircrews. On some acft we did not refuel after flight as it was becoming a fire hazard to the point that old fire hoses were filled with sand to build a containment area to prevent fuel running between acft.

On many occasions wings were left empty so that the acft could fly without inducing a flight hazard. The amount of faying surface reverted sealant on the exterior of the skin/tanks was so soft, it was being trailed in streams along the skin and out of servicing access panels for several feet. As part of our servicing and on flight line we cleaned the skin with fuel, white spirit and MEK on a piece of rag and other chemicals such as an aircraft washing detergent to wipe the sealant off to at least make the acft look clean and to rid the exposure to the sealant, if at all possible.

We had no option but to use the same removal process to get the sticky mess off our bodies as we were covered in the reverted goo just from removing panels and working in areas replacing parts, and the reverted goo was everywhere.

In many cases when tank entries were completed most of us were also covered in new sealant because of the confined spaces we were working in.

As far as I can recall we never received official training on mixing the sealants and were not told of any carcinogenic effects from the sealants and chemicals used and/or what health precautions to take when using this chemical cocktail.

As I have said in my submission we were resident in those tanks picking and patching the leaks daily for hours per shift, week after week on 2 shifts per day every day including weekends, to try and stem the leaks so 1&6 Squadron could meet flying commitments, all the while inhaling the stench of the cocktail of fuel, sealant and chemicals etc. We never had time to fully rid the tanks of noxious fumes.

GSE and PPE available then were not suitable for the task of entering the fuel tanks because of the confined space. We were resourceful enough to do whatever we could to get the job done. The plastic gloves provided were useless as they were thin and ill fitting to a point they were an impairment. This meant using your bare hands for handling the chemicals, fuel and sealant whilst spitting on your fingers to smooth the sealant. Fresh air was from ground aircon carts with the air supply duct positioned in the access panels to at least get some fresh air into the tanks so we could get in the tank to repair the leaks. Quite often we would only dry the immediate area to seal, as time was of the essence. The stench of fuel, sealant and chemicals was so overpowering we would always have a buddy outside to make sure that you were ok and did not pass out because of the fumes. When using the ground aircon cart to give us fresh air if there was residual fuel in the tanks, it would disturb the fuel thus stirring up the fumes we were inhaling. Inhalation was so intense that once you came out of the tank for fresh air you head would spin for several minutes. You would not dare to exit the tank through the access panel until you gained your balance

In those days we never had confined space or fuel tank entry training, so it did not help us at 482 Sqn when they were considering our application to be included in the ex gratia payment scheme.

We learnt to mix and use sealants from reading the labels and manuals and working it out for ourselves. The sealant in most of the tanks appeared solid but with in flight skin movement and the breakdown of the faying surface sealant leaks occurred. The internal sealant was in most cases still intact but fuel would find a weak spot not visible to the naked eye. In some cases the leak would travel between the skin/ribs until it found a way out of the faying surface. This was extremely frustrating because it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. In some cases there would be more than one breakdown allowing the fuel to run out. It was a painstaking task to rectify the leak.

On finding a suspect leak area we would pick the area out with a Perspex scraper and/or a dental pick. The area would be cleaned by applying MEK on a piece of rag, then replace any damaged barrier, corrosion coating and replace several layers of the sealant barrier. Once the sealant was dry we would refuel the acft and pressurize the tanks and re-check for leaks. Many hours were accumulated trying to find the source of these leaks and constant repairs and failures caused re-entry again and again.

This was the process and conditions you looked forward to everyday when you went to work. The work was carried out in the hangar, on the tarmac and on deployments in Australia and overseas, night and day in hot, cold and inclement weather to keep the fleet flying.

#### COMPARISON OF DS/RS WORKERS TO 482 SQN WORKERS

When you look at the criteria for the ex gratia payment applied to those in the DR/RS hangar we at 482 Sqn far exceeded the requirement of hours yet were not considered. Whilst I respect the DS/RS workers we were working in wet tanks all the time with full fume inhalation, handling fuel, chemicals and sealants in all sorts of weather and conditions without the aid of suitable protection for our health.

To this end I had spent more time doing F111 fuel tanks repairs and in worse conditions than any DS/RS troops and far exceeded the criteria required by Tier 1 requirements, as I was doing this work from 1973 until I was posted in December 1978 and received no recognition in regard to fuel tank repairs.

### QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

- Why wasn't my letter of complaint to the Secretary of DVA answered?
- Why wasn't my Stat Declaration acceptable?
- Why were the criteria for the payment specifically for DS/RS troops?
- Where are the records of postings and our work?
- Why did it specify in the ex gratia application "from 1977"?
- Why weren't the 482 Sqn troops considered?
- What did DVA and Defence think happened between 1973 and 1977 regarding fuel leak repairs and why did Dept of Defence exclude us?
- Why doesn't DVA recognize SHOAMP documents for illnesses?
- Will DVA ever recognize our illnesses from SHOAMP docs?
- Will the pick and patch repairers at 482 Sqn ever receive any recognition as Tier 1 making us also eligible for compensation and acceptance for other resultant medical conditions caused by fuel tank effects, by DVA?

### CONCLUSION

I stopped seeking compensation for my other illnesses/conditions from DVA as I was not recognized as working in F111 fuel tanks and did not comply with the SOP's even though the SHOAMP documents did state the causal link. Also the trauma I have been through to get to this point was exacerbating my depression illness. Being rejected by DVA time after time is very depressing and frustrating.

My personal thought is that there will be a lot of ducking and weaving between Agencies over this and we will still not receive recognition. In the beginning of the whole issue it would have been embarrassing to include us at 482 Sqn as the Agencies would have been under pressure to compensate us where they failed

to ensure our health and safety. It is said that records of that time have been destroyed, but it is interesting when DVA can reject a medical claim based on your service history? How does that happen?

Listening to the broadcast of the hearing on Monday 21Jul 08 and some of the answers given by the Agencies, it makes me believe that decision making parties will not acknowledge that we served at 482 Sqn doing the same work as the DS/RS troops, and we will still be discriminated against and not be recognized nor compensated.

Maybe the Agencies can explain to the wives and children of deceased members from 482Sqn why they are turning their backs on them. We want to be treated equitably in line with the DS/RS workers.

As committee members you will no doubt read and hear similar stories to mine from other fellow squadron members regarding the pick and patch work we did at 482Sqn in those early years before and after the DS/RS programme. As you will see we are not fantasizing about our medical conditions and the work we did as there are too many of us to ignore.

If we are ignored this time and not compensated nor recognized, it will place the Agencies into a questionable position with regard to current and future serving members on how they can look forward to being treated should they suffer service related medical conditions only to find they are not accepted after serving their country.

Barry Gray



Kevin Patrick RILEY  
[REDACTED]

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Reference: Mr Barry Gray  
Participation in the F111 Reseal / Deseal / Tank Entry Program

The purpose of this declaration is to provide supporting information for his request for payment of the F111 Deseal / Reseal Lump sum payment.

- I was posted on strength at 82 Wing / 482 Squadron as an Airframe fitter on F111 aircraft from June 1973 through to May 1979. During the period, 1973 to 1978, I worked very closely with Mr Gray. During that period, I actually worked as a subordinate of Mr Gray with him holding the rank of Corporal and later the rank of Sergeant.
- During this period we were both employed conducting ongoing fuel leak repairs on the aircraft, necessitating continual tank entries. While records of individual tank entries were not kept during this period, I can confirm that Mr Gray would have spent in excess of the required 60 cumulative days employed inside the F111 fuel tanks conducting pick and patch repairs.

Declaration made before [Signature]  
at SOUTHPORT, on 14<sup>th</sup> day of December 2005.



[Signature]  
Signed  
Kevin Patrick Riley OAM

27 March, 2006

The Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
PO Box 21  
Woden  
ACT 2606

Dear Sir/Madam.

I wish to make a formal complaint against the process of resolving claims and some staff in the Brisbane Office of DVA and MCRS.

I applied for the ex gratia payment from the F111 DS/RS programme in accordance with the DVA guidelines published by the then Minister for Veterans Affairs. I supplied all the information requested and further information if I could when requested. On several occasions over the ensuing weeks I had left messages for Tony Behm, but if he was not in the office he was on leave, and unless I kept ringing him I would never get him to reply. He rang me today and said he has left messages but there were none on the house telephone or my mobile.

The last time I spoke to him, two weeks ago, he said my file was in Canberra for the Delegate to review and to call him back the following week to get an update. I rang last Friday 17<sup>th</sup> March only to be told he was not in the office, so once again I left a message for him to call me. I have left a further two messages this week and still have not had not a reply so I again rang today to find that he was on leave again. He rang me today and said he had left messages but again there were no messages on the house telephone or my mobile.

Last Friday I was given the contact details for the Delegate in Canberra only to be told there are no files with this Delegate. This is the second time Mr. Behm has lead me astray with tales. Again today Mr. Behm said the files were in Canberra and perhaps the Delegate did not know they were there. Now he tells me it is up to the Minister of Veterans Affairs to make a decision because I was in 482 and 1 Squadron. I have had enough of this treatment and he should be removed from this position and his position given to a person that has been trained in customer courtesy. I am told he has been busy, but that is life. I have been in the corporate world and it is paramount to communicate with people.

My other complaint is that some DVA staff in the Brisbane office need to put themselves in the position of Veterans and have empathy for their frustrations and more importantly the health problems Veterans are afflicted with. The DVA staff and Delegates seem to have this holier than thou attitude and treat Veterans as less than human beings and cannot be bothered with listening to their problems. This is not a simple whinge - it has

basis that I am willing to discuss further - face to face with an executive member of DVA and MCRS.

I have met with my local MP Mr. Mal Brough to discuss these issues but that has not resolved my problems as it is outside his portfolio. I have emailed the past and present Minister but did not get reply. So it appears to me and other Veterans that we are not worth the time to help us even though we have served our country which in my case is over 20 years. The footer on DVA correspondence says "Saluting their Service" - what an insult when DVA staff disrespect Veterans.

For your information I am currently seeking compensation etc through MCRS for Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia and other illnesses I contracted during my service. I have been unable to convince DVA under the VEA SOP's that I should receive a TPI pension, and I am currently on a 100% Disability Pension for other conditions. The Delegate from MCRS tells me that they are waiting to see if I am approved under the DS/RS program before they process my claim for CLL and other illnesses. I have told them that there is no need to wait as my claim is stand alone and I have Statutory Declarations confirming my involvement in F111 fuel tanks repairs between 1973 and 1978 and documentation that stating that jet fuel and CLL have a direct link, which is confirmed by my oncologist. I hope that they look at my illnesses as a direct result from my employment in the squadrons and not DS/RS. I was told that I could appeal the decision if it went against me and they would have another Delegate review my file. I find this attitude negative and I feel as if I have lost before the claim is determined.

My claim for CLL and other illnesses should be reviewed using the information gained by the eminent medical specialists and scientist employed by the Government during the investigation into the SHOAMP document. That investigation clearly shows the link between CLL and jet fuel along with other conditions I have, and that information should be used whether I gain approval for the ex gratia payment to determine my claim or not.

The other concern I have is that Repatriation Medical Authority ignore the medical opinion in the SHOAMP report of the cause for CLL and do not recognize jet fuel as a cause for CLL in the VEA SOP's. I have asked Mr. Brough to take this up on my behalf with RMA and as yet have not had a response; I have also sent the information to the Ministers for Defence and Veterans Affairs and again have not had any response. I find it difficult to understand how the Government can spend so much time and money on the SHOAMP investigation and the information not be used to determine claims, in particular my condition of CLL.

I can be contacted on [REDACTED] or by email to [REDACTED] I look forward to your timely response.

Regards

Barry Gray