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

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F-111

liamentary Inquiry

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Wednesday, 11 June 2008

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY

INTO RAAF F-111

DESEAL-RESEAL WORKERS

AND THEIR FAMILIES

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CHAPTER 1

SERVICE HISTORY

1 TRAINING

I joined RAAF on the 5th of January 1977 as an engineering apprentice at the age of 16. I did my trade training at RAAFSTT, Wagga Wagga. I graduated in April 1979.

2 482 SQUADRON

I was posted to No 482 SQN at RAAF Base Amberley and was employed in the electrical workshop until July 1980. During this time I was reclassified to LAC.

3 FLIGHTLINE

I was then transferred to the flightline. My duties were to carry out operating level maintenance on F-111C aircraft. During this time my duties involved the maintenance and trouble shooting of the many electrical systems on the aircraft. These duties included fuel pump and fuel indication systems.

4 TANK ENTRIES

I was required on many occasions to enter fuel tanks to replace components including the Boost Pumps, Fuel Indication Probes and their associated harnesses. During the course of these actions I was required de-seal and re-seal these components as part of the removal and installation process.

5 PERSONAL PROTECTION (PPE)

No form of personal protective equipment (PPE) was issued or suggested except for white plastic overalls to be worn over a pair of shorts and a 'T' shirt. These overalls were not waterproof in this environment. After a short time they would begin to leak due to the solvents and fuel breaking down the material in the fabric.

The only form of fresh air was air conditioned air blown in through the tank access panels. This served in a large part to only stir toxic chemicals around the inside of the tank. Due to the timeframe involved in Deseal / Reseal maintenance at operational level, this window of opportunity would be used to carry out any other maintenance that was required inside the fuel tanks. Much of this work was done in the late at night and in the early hours of the morning.

6 PERIODIC SERVICING AND MAINTENANCE

In February 1981 I was transferred to the Periodic Servicing and Maintenance hangar to carry out intermediate level maintenance on the F-111C. This involved much of the same type of work except that the aircraft were serviced at a deeper level. Much of the time maintenance including Deseal / Reseal work was carried out while the aircraft was being serviced due to the luxury of having more time. In other words it was carried out while the aircraft was out of service.

Again I was required to enter the fuel tanks as I had done whilst I was on the Flight Line. The only difference was that there were only three electrical tradesmen in the section so the tank entries were more frequent.

7 COMPUTER AIDED MAINTENANCE MANAGEMENT

On the 5th of May, 1981, I was posted back to RAAFSTT to carry out duties associated with the introduction of Computer Aided Maintenance Management (CAMM).

8 BACK TO 482SQN

In January, 1982, I was posted back to 482 SQN, Amberley.

9 ARMAMENT SECTION

I was employed in armament section as the sole electrical fitter for twelve months where I carried out duties such as electrical repairs to armament equipment.

10 ENGINE SECTION

I was then moved to engine section to carry out electrical repairs to uninstalled F-111C engines wiring and ground support equipment on the engine test stand.

11 COLLAPSING

In August 1983, I was at a party and collapsed after only one stubby. My Wife took me to the Ipswich General Hospital. She took to the emergency ward. I was still in an unconscious state. After being admitted, my Wife told the hospital staff that she would take our 18 month daughter home.

While my Wife was away, the hospital staff decided that I had been drinking too much and called the Ipswich police who took me to the Ipswich Police Station where they put me in a cell to apparently "dry out." My Wife returned about 20 minutes later to the hospital to see how I was going only to find out I had been put in the lockup.

12 FIRST SIGNS

She then went over the road to the police station and by this time I had wet my pants while still unconscious. Still dizzy my Wife took me home. All this happened without any of my knowledge.

In hindsight, I believe that this was the first sign from the effects of contact with chemicals used during Deseal / Reseal.

13 SENIOR MEDICAL OFFICER

The following Monday I received a phone call from the base medical section and was told to report to them as soon as possible. I did so and was called in by the Senior Medical Officer. He was totally unsympathetic and did not even do as much as a temperature or blood pressure check. To him it was a simple open and shut case. I was an "alcoholic" and had a drinking problem.

14 WARRANT OFFICER ENGINEER OF ENGINE SECTION

I went back to work and the next phone call I got was from the WOE of Engine Section. He too asked for my presence. Again I obliged. He was however; more sympathetic as he had done his homework. He had actually gone to the trouble of checking with my workmates to see if I was indeed a heavy drinker or if I had ever turned up to work hung over. All these questions were answered in the negative. In fact no one had actually ever seen me drink. However he was just the messenger and I was given a disciplinary transfer back to the Electrical Workshop.

15 OFFICER - IN – CHARGE OF AVIONICS

I was then called in to see the Officer-in-Charge of Avionics to which Electrical section belonged. We had a nice chat and then he told me to go on my way.

16 FORMAL WARNING

Three months later he called me back and said the formal warning that he had failed to tell me I was on, was now finished. I said that I was unaware that I had been put on a formal warning. With that I went back to work like my guts had been wrenched out.

17 PROMOTIONAL CHANCES

By this time I was due for my Corporals promotion. Most of the electricians that had graduated from trade training at RAAFSTT at around the same time were beginning to get promoted. The last thing that I wanted was to be put on a formal warning as this would seriously influence my chance of being promoted.

18 AFTEWS

I bided my time and finally they transferred me to AFTEWS (Ground support equipment workshop). It was now April 1985. I worked on cars, trucks and other GSE. My main duty was servicing the hook cables and barrier nets that are used in case of an emergency landing to prevent aircraft running off the runway.

19 MOOD CHANGES

My moods were starting to change by now and the slightest word out of place would upset me. I kept most of this to myself but it was getting worse and my family life was beginning to suffer.

20 3AD

On the 12th of December, 1985, I was posted to No 3 Aircraft Depot at the other end of the base into the Electrical workshop. The work was easy as I had done it all before at the 482SQN Electrical workshop. It also helped that I had a friendly face as one of the Corporals working there was off my electrical course at Wagga Wagga. Things were beginning to go my way or so I thought.

21 486SQN RICHMOND

At the end of August, 1986, I was posted to 486 SQN in Richmond NSW. My main duties involved servicing, maintenance and flightline duties on Hercules C130E and H model aircraft. These duties would vary from week to week and the flightline duties were rostered at all hours around the clock. The workload and hours were extremely heavy.

22 STRESSES AND STRAINS

It was all beginning to catch up with me as not only did I have a new aircraft type to work on but the different hours were taking their toll. I was having more and more problems at home and I was not at all happy. In an

effort to overcome my stress and anxiety, I would go and see one of the base Chaplains on an almost weekly basis. They were a great help but I still didn't understand what was happening to me.

23 THE PROMOTION

Finally on the 1st of July 1987, ten and a half years after enlisting I was promoted to Corporal. It didn't mean that my demeanour had changed as I was still under stress but at least I felt as if I was going somewhere.

24 38 SQN

In April 1988, I was posted to 38SQN, also at Richmond. I was employed as a trade supervisor for servicing, maintenance and flightline duties on Caribou aircraft. I was still getting more and more depressed but at least the working hours were better.

25 FIRST DISCHARGE

In May of 1989 after a major "dummy spit," I made a "knee jerk" decision to discharge from the RAAF. We (My Wife and I) decided to discharge at Amberley because this was the closest to the Sunshine Coast where my Wife's family lived.

26 RE-ENLISTMENT

After six months on the Sunshine Coast, I realised that finding a job was

much harder than I had envisaged. In October 1989, I decided to re-enlist back into the RAAF. The only stumbling block was that while on my pre-enlistment medical check, blood was found in my urine.

27 MEDICAL ISSUES

I was asked by the recruiting Medical Officer to have the problem checked out by our GP on the Sunshine Coast before they would make a decision as to whether they would accept me back into the RAAF. I had various tests as requested, however there was no diagnosis or reason for the occurrence. They powers that be decided that they would let me back in.

28 RAAFSTT ELECTRICAL SECTION

I was temporarily posted back to Wagga Wagga again as an instructor. I was also involved in rewriting instructor guides and examination questions. The funny thing was that Electrical Training Section at RAAFSTT was not told of my posting. It just showed how much the "left hand knew what the right hand" was doing. The paper work had been misplaced.

29 MAINTENANCE SUPPORT SQN TOWNSVILLE (MSSTVL)

As this was a temporary posting I was posted to Maintenance Support Squadron in Townsville in July, 1990. I was the NCO in charge of Electrical Section. My duties included such things as maintenance of base ground support equipment, the hook cable and the base uninterruptable power supplies.

30 MORE PROBLEMS

I started to have more and more problems at home and then I started having problems at work as well. If I disagreed with anything anyone said to me, I would go off the deep end for no apparent reason. It didn't matter who it was, I would let them really have it verbally. Eventually even the Officer-in-Charge received some of my wrath.

31 PSYCHIATRIST'S REPORT

I was sent to medical and they referred me to a psychiatrist. He saw me for about 20 minutes and then concluded that there was nothing wrong with me. To add insult to the injury, he said that it was my Wife's fault.

32 POSTING APPLICATIONS

It was at that stage that I applied for a preferential posting back to Amberley as my family was isolated from other family members. We (my Wife and I) agreed that this was the best course of action because we would have support from extended family.

33 REFUSALS

It was refused so I applied again. Again it was refused. I filled out yet another application for a preferential posting as a last ditch effort. Again it was refused but this time the reply also suggested that if I didn't like I could get out.

35 FINAL DISCHARGE

I called their bluff. I was gone within two weeks. We moved back to the Sunshine Coast in April 1992.

CHAPTER 2

LIFE AFTER THE RAAF

1 EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS

Things did calm down a little at home however I was unable to hold a job. One job lasted 3 days after which I was asked not to come back. Another lasted six weeks before I was again sacked.

2 A FRESH START

In October 1994, I applied for a job at Ballina in NSW as an auto electrician. My Mother and my Sister lived in Lismore where I had grown up before joining the RAAF. I thought that this would help alleviate some of the problems we had been having. We would make a fresh start in a new area with a new job.

3 ASSAULTING MY WIFE

We had been living at my Mother's house for about two weeks while were looking for somewhere to live. Out of nowhere I exploded and assaulted my Wife. She said she had had enough and started packing up. I went out to the car and lifted the bonnet to try and stop my Wife and Family from leaving.

4 JAIL AGAIN

The police arrived while I was doing this and took me away to the lockup. I was later released that night after having a DVO put on me.

5 COURT PROCEEDINGS

About a month later I had to front up in court. By now we were living in Ballina and my Wife and I had patched things up over the argument. She had decided because it was not the real me that had assaulted her, she would not accept any notices to appear in court. By doing this the whole thing was thrown out of court when the appearance day arrived.

6 SACKED YET AGAIN

Things seemed to be going well until January 1995. After three months, the boss arrived at work and asked me to leave. He said that he had no complaints about my work but said it was a personality clash. He even went to trouble of driving me back home as I had been dropped off to work by my Wife a little earlier.

7 THE BREAKDOWN

Again we packed up and went back to the Sunshine Coast. The difference this time was that when we got there I had a complete mental breakdown. For six months I just sat in a lounge chair not daring to go outside. I had no interest in what was going on around me.

8 MEDICAL HELP

My wife took me to our GP and he referred me to a psychiatrist whom I have been seeing ever since. I was eventually put on a Centrelink disability pension and have not been able to work since January, 1995.

9 FAILED DVA CLAIM

In late 1995, I put a claim into DVA for "stress and anxiety." It was refused because they could not find anything in my service records that could have caused anxiety and/or depression.

10 NEWS AND REALISATION

In mid 2000, after seeing news reports that Deseal / Reseal programs had affected the health of ex-RAAF personnel, I realised that I had also been affected by the chemicals used during Deseal / Reseal programs back in 1980 / 1981 at 482 SQN.

11 CLAIM SUBMISSIONS

Following the release of the report I resubmitted my claims. As I had a dual entitlement under both DVA and MCRS, I put in the same applications to both of them.

After seeing what felt like "umpteens dozen" DVA and MCRS doctors and specialists, I was finally awarded a part DVA disability pension and

fortnightly incapacity payments from MCRS. The MCRS claims were back dated to the initial claim date of January, 1995. Since that time I have had other injuries accepted.

CHAPTER 3

ACCEPTED CONDITIONS AND MEDICATION

Since 1980, I have been suffering from several medical conditions which have degenerated over the years. It has only been with the benefit of hindsight that these conditions have been able to be diagnosed. The following disorders have been diagnosed and accepted by both DVA and MCRS.

1 ACCEPTED CONDITIONS

a Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Symptoms:

- i Mood swings,
- ii Agitation,
- iii Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia.

b Personality Disorder

Symptoms:

- i Personality change due general medical conditions,
- ii Irritability,
- iii Low frustration tolerance,
- iv Temper outbursts,
- v Paranoia.

c Substance Induced Persisting Dementia

Symptoms:

- i Dementia,
- ii Loss of cognitive ability.

d Insulin Dependent Diabetes Type II

Symptoms:

- i Hyperglycaemia,
- ii Hypoglycaemia.

e Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Symptoms:

- i Abdominal cramps,
- ii Erratic bowel habits,
- iii Flatulence.

f Psoriasis

Symptoms:

- i Scaly rash on elbows and knees,
- ii Ulcerous sores on legs and arms.

g Sexual dysfunction

2 MEDICATION

I am taking the following medications.

MORNING

1 ASPIRIN
1 DIABEX
1 ZYBAN
1 EPILIM
1 LEXAPRO
½ LITHICARB

NIGHT

1 DIABEX
1 VYTORIN
1 TRITACE
1 IRBESARTAN
1 SOMAC
1 ZYBAN
1 LEXAPRO
1 EPILIM

INSULIN

	BREAKFAST	LUNCH	DINNER	NIGHT
NOVORAPID	14 UNITS	11 UNITS	20 UNITS	-----
LANTUS	-----	-----	-----	60UNITS

AS REQUIRED

56 RISPOTAL QUICKLET
 ADVANTAN CREAM
 HAMILTON BODY WASH
 PANAMAX

CHAPTER 4

EFFECTS OF THE ILLNESSES

1 ON ME

In addition to taking the above medications I have to monitor my blood sugar levels prior to having an insulin injection. All this medication has a severe effect on my life as to where I can and can't go.

The insulin must to be kept refrigerated otherwise it will go off. When we go anywhere longer than four hours the insulin has to be packed on ice, needles have to be packed and the Blood Sugar Meter has to be packed.

If we go anywhere longer than 12 hours then all my other medications have to be packed.

The quality of my life is less than normal. I can't go to shopping centres as I cannot cope with crowds or people in my personal space.

I get frustrated very easily because I forget things or forget where I have left them. This affects the dynamics within my family. Because of this frustration I get irritable and usually end up taking it out on the nearest person to me. This is normally a close member of my family.

Due to my irritable bowel syndrome, it means that I have to be near a toilet at all times. A spare set of clothes also has to be packed even if we are out for a couple of hours in case of an accident.

Due to the combination of medications, motivation is a major problem that I have to deal with on a daily basis. It is a major task to even get out of bed most of the time. Jobs that I used to do around the house now are major hurdles to start let alone finish.

Had I not come into contact with the cocktail of toxic chemicals, my RAAF career would have taken me in a completely different path? (i.e. I would not have collapsed in August 1983, therefore I would not have been moved and I would not have been put on a formal warning.)

Having said that, I would have been promoted sooner and would probably not been posted around the way I was.

2 ON MY FAMILY

As I am under constant stress, the members of my family have to make allowances for my behaviour. This in turn puts added stress upon them. I am lucky that they have stood by me after all that has happened.

As my motivation is low this in turn puts an extra burden on the other members of the family. They have to make allowances and carry out the tasks that I can no longer do.

My family has had to put up with a lot over the last 30 years or so. They too have been totally ignored by the previous government. Some of my family have also suffered the effects of the chemicals in an indirect way. For example my work clothes were washed in the same washing machine that theirs were. This surely would have contaminated the clothes that they were wearing.

As mentioned before, my career would have taken a different path if I had

not been exposed to the toxic mix of chemicals. To this end, because my promotional prospects were slowed, they have not benefitted from the pay rises that rightly should have come my way.

To a great extent my family has had a lot to put up with.

CHAPTER 5

QUESTIONS FOR THE INQUIRY

1 HOW DO WE PROVIDE PROOF?

If it was the fault of the RAAF that no records were kept then why is it up to us to prove that we were actually involved in these maintenance programs before we can be offered an ex-gratia payment?

2 HOW WERE CLAIMS ACCEPTED

Although receiving an ex-gratia payment was not supposed to be a prerequisite to acceptance of any claims for injuries, why were they claims accepted after an ex-gratia claims were allowed?

There is an accepted list of conditions which are paid once evidence of involvement is provided with regard to Deseal-Reseal.

3 REVERSE LOGIC

Having said that, if these claims were accepted after an ex-gratia payment, then why didn't it work the other way around?

In my case I had already had claims accepted by both MCRS and DVA that were accepted as being involved with Deseal-Reseal programs at 482 SQN.

Surely logic should have worked to my advantage. My tank entries had already been proven by the fact that I was already being paid for the injuries associated with the effects of having been inside the fuel tanks during Deseal-Reseal processes.

4 STATEMENTS

Why were the goal posts shifted?

In regard to the ex-gratia payment, I was asked to prove my involvement by providing a statement from someone that had seen me entering the tanks. After I provided two statements, I was told that they could not be used.

5 PREVIOUS MINISTER

The then Minister totally ignored all the anecdotal evidence from at the board of inquiry that deseal / reseal maintenance was carried out at squadron level. Many witnesses said that deseal / reseal programs were carried out at squadron level?

I received a letter (in fact about ten of the same one in all) after sending Emails to all Commonwealth Members of Parliament, from Bruce Billson MP telling me that no Deseal / Reseal programs had been done at squadron level. There are many that would disagree with that. Surely the anecdotal evidence

that was provided in the Board of Inquiry would have substantiated all these claims.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The road that many of us have taken since deseal-reseal has been a very long and arduous one. For every story that you may hear there are hundreds that won't be told.

While bearing no animosity against any one person, group of people, or even the RAAF, it must be said that the system that was supposed to protect us has let us down.

It is not my wish to draw blood but to simply claim what should be rightfully ours. The biggest insult that many of have suffered was to be ignored and then shutout of a process which was promised to us.

It is by no fault of the squadron personnel that the ex-gratia payment was refused.

It is by no fault of the squadron personnel that proper records were not kept.

It is by no fault of the squadron personnel that they are sick.

Finally, it was by no fault squadron personnel that some of us have died.

Although our problems will not just go away by the government waiving its

magic wand, it would mean a great amount to us (deseal-reseal workers) to see that we have not been totally abandoned. Many of our number have fallen by the wayside and it is with them in mind and their now devastated widows and families that I make this plea. It is not a handout that we want but simply a hand up and the knowledge that the Australian Government like many of our well wishers actually care about what has happened in the past.

I would also like to thank those who are involved in the Parliamentary Inquiry.

Yours Sincerely,

A redacted signature consisting of two thick black horizontal bars. The top bar is longer and has some faint, illegible markings above it, while the bottom bar is shorter and positioned directly below the first.