



## **Submission 113**

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

**Name: Mr Bevan Victor**

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Mr. Bevan John Victor

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The Defence Sub-Committee Secretariat  
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Dear Secretary,

In late 2006 I met with my local federal member for Blair Mr. Cameron Thompson to discuss my concerns following the F111 Deseal/Reseal ex gratia payment eligibility/definition criteria and the subsequent ineligibility of the personnel that I managed at 482Sqn to receive these exgratia payments. I met again with him in the first half of 2007 to further discuss these issues. He asked me to write a letter to him to express these concerns and he would personally make representation to the Veteran's Affairs Minister, Mr. Bruce Billson to discuss the contents of my letter and my concerns.

The following is a brief account of the information I presented to Mr. Thompson by letter and this letter was on forwarded and discussed with Mr. Billson. Also there are some quotes from Mr. Billson's letter of reply to Mr. Thompson.

I was a Warrant Officer Engineer in charge of a group of 482Sqn Periodic Servicing and Major Servicing (PS&MS) maintenance personnel from 1987-1989 who were employed in the permanent Pick and Patch Maintenance Program of F111 aircraft at 482Sqn from late 1987 to 1990.

In late 1987 there was a meeting between senior engineering staff from 3AD and 482Sqn to address the worsening F111 fuel tank leaking problem. It was decided at this meeting that 482Sqn would take on the responsibility of a permanent Pick and Patch maintenance program to rectify these problems. I was tasked with the job to set up and manage this program at 482Sqn PS&MS. I had to provide the manpower, order ground support equipment or borrow it from 3AD and order and supply the appropriate safety equipment for the program. I also had to provide one quarter of our hangar floor area to accommodate the aircraft undergoing this Pick and Patch maintenance program. Other major servicings at 482Sqn on F111 aircraft were either rescheduled or postponed to accommodate the Pick and Patch maintenance program aircraft. These aircraft were given high priority in order to return them serviceable as quickly as possible back to 1 & 6

Squadron enabling these squadrons to meet their flying commitments. The Pick and Patch maintenance program at 482Sqn PS&MS continued on a full time basis from 1987-1990.

From 1990, I believe 3AD took over this role from 482Sqn PS&MS and continued with a formal Pick and Patch Maintenance Program. The reason for this was that the man hours required to carry out pick and patch activities on the aircraft from 1987-1990 was fast becoming too much for 482 Sqn PS&MS personnel and their facilities to handle. The number of leaking aircraft that required work was rapidly increasing. 482Sqn PS&MS was able to then concentrate on their primary role of Intermediate Level Maintenance which was performing major R3 and R4 servicing and periodic servicing and major repairs on F111 aircraft.

Personnel involved in the Pick and Patch Maintenance Program at 482Sqn during 1987-1990 worked in wet tanks, confined spaces, used dangerous chemicals and as we know now, used inferior personal protective equipment. Because of the ongoing nature of this work my senior engineering officer at 482Sqn Wing Commander Craig Fitzgerald in 1988 approved personnel who were involved in pick and patch maintenance activities to receive Deseal/Reseal Allowances, Confined Space Allowances and Hazard Chemicals Allowances, **the exact same allowances that 3AD Pick and Patch maintenance personnel received doing the same job from 1990 and on.** 482Sqn PS&MS personnel wore breathing apparatus, full safety suits, gloves and boots and were rotated every 3 hours because of the conditions inside the fuel tanks and chemicals that were used were considered highly toxic. One member would stay outside the tanks and stand watch (Safety Member) and checked the breathing air levels and the overall safety of those members who worked inside the tanks. Registers of Tank Entry Sheets and hours worked inside tanks were filled out daily. Personnel did become sick at times and were taken to medical section or in other cases personnel had a break from the fuel tank environment to recover. This issue was often raised with senior staff management. Members RTE's did not document that they worked in the Pick and Patch program at the time because it was considered to be **"Major Servicing & Major Rectifications"** at 482Sqn by our senior engineering staff and RTE's were documented accordingly with the above phrase.

Many RAAF and civilian maintenance personnel are required to enter the fuel tanks of F111 aircraft on a daily basis to perform maintenance activities, be it plumbing work, fuel pump changes and minor fuel tank leaks and structural repairs etc. This work was carried out at Nos 1, 6 & 482 Sqns, and at 3AD. These personnel did not receive allowances in their pay for this type of work .However, a number of these individuals, have since been given ex gratia payments (Tier 2, \$10000) for this type of work because someone has incorrectly entered Deseal/Reseal authorisation into their RAAF RTE'S. Also administrative and equipment and other non technical staff at 3AD who have never even entered an aircraft fuel tank but worked in the building where deseal/reseal and pick and patch maintenance was performed were considered eligible and received (Tier 2) ex gratia payments. The type of work or employment that the above groups of personnel carried out can in no way be compared with the in-depth, complex and hazardous Pick and Patch maintenance program activities that the personnel at 482Sqn PS&MS performed in 1987-1990. The injustice here is that not one of the 482 Sqn PS&MS

personnel who performed Pick and Patch maintenance in the tanks over those 3 years has ever received ex gratia payments. They have been denied payment while the groups in 3AD i.e. The Deseal/Reseal group and the Pick and Patch group have received (Tier 1, \$40000) ex gratia payments.

The eligibility/definition criteria for the ex gratia payment I believe is incorrect and needs to be amended to include those personnel who were at 482Sqn PS&MS and carried out Pick and Patch maintenance during 1987-1990. Any 482Sqn PS&MS maintenance personnel who previously submitted their Deseal/Reseal ex gratia compensation claim forms and meet the dates 1987-1990 should be approved for the ex gratia payment. Any other Squadron maintenance personnel, be it Nos 1, 6&482 Sqn who were associated with any form of deseal/reseal and pick and patch maintenance work from 1973-2000 should also be approved for the ex gratia payments.

The question was put to RAAF Air Marshal Angus Houston about 2-3 years ago by my ex 482Sqn section personnel at the Spurgeon Room at RAAF Amberley about 6 months prior to the release of ex gratia payment eligibility criteria, as to whether all workers who performed any Deseal/Reseal and Pick and Patch activities on the F111 aircraft be it at 3AD, 482 Maintenance Squadron, 1 & 6 Squadrons would be considered for the ex gratia payment. His response was that anyone involved in any of the Deseal/Reseal and Pick & Patch programs at any RAAF Amberley Units would be considered eligible participants. At the time we believed that this response from the Air Marshal included our 482Sqn PS&MS and other operational Squadron personnel and that the RAAF investigative processes through aircraft documentation searches, personnel pay slips and allowances searches and 482Sqn technical administrative files would have highlighted our section as being an authorised Pick and Patch Maintenance Section. This obviously did not occur or was not even considered.

I feel the people who determined the definition criteria were not made fully aware of all personnel who actually did deseal/reseal and pick and patch maintenance work at other units on RAAF Amberley. I also believe that there was bias towards 3AD personnel by the panel with the belief that this unit was the only unit which performed this type of activity. One member of the panel who determined eligibility contacted me by phone since the ex gratia payments were granted and openly admitted to me that he was not aware of the extent of the work that my personnel performed and said he had a sense of guilt that these people were not included. Is that not an injustice to all of us concerned or just inept investigative procedures by the RAAF I ask you the Committee. Why also, was there not a Squadron WOE on the panel to make a level playing field when determining people's eligibility?

As an ex Warrant Officer Engineer previously in charge of these 482Sqn PS&MS personnel I feel I am responsible for pursuing their entitlement of ex gratia payments. As stated above, the men performed for at least 3 years, the exact same work to that of pick and patch maintenance workers at 3AD who have received ex gratia payments. 482Sqn PS&MS personnel received Deseal/Reseal allowance, Confined Space Allowance and Hazardous Chemical Allowance during this time which is clearly

displayed on their pay sheets but they still were not included in the eligibility/definition for ex gratia payment criteria. Our efforts performing Pick and Patch maintenance at 482Sqn PS&MS during 1987-1990 needs to be acknowledged and our ongoing health care support through VA needs to be continued because of the exceptional circumstances we found ourselves in during those years.

I also presented Mr. Thompson with copies of some of my personnel's pay slips clearly showing their Deseal/Reseal Allowances and other associated fuel tank allowances that they received from 1987-1990. He supplied these pay slips with my letter to Mr. Billson.

Mr. Billson's reply to my letter was very disappointing and in my opinion he has been grossly misinformed. He stated in his letter and I quote:

"The work undertaken as a part of the four formal deseal/reseal programs was very different in both its scale and complexity, from ad hoc maintenance activities carried out at squadron level."

My experiences are to the contrary to Mr. Billson's remarks in that the work carried out by my people at 482 Squadron was in fact as hazardous, and equally complex to that of the 3AD formal programs. I might add that we worked in wet fuel tanks and worse conditions at times to get the aircraft back on line to the Squadrons, whereas the 3AD aircraft tanks were dried out prior to their work commencement.

He also said and I quote:

"Neither the BOI nor the Health Study sought to examine the circumstances of those who participated in activities ancillary to the four DSRS Programs. Therefore, while the Government could decide to broaden the DSRS definition to include those who had conducted activities at other RAAF Base Amberley maintenance squadrons, there is no basis on which to do so."

The above quote is the crux of the problem we are facing today. There does need to be a broadening of the DSRS definition to include the other Squadrons at RAAF Amberley. The basis for this is that the BOI has overlooked or were not told about the other Squadrons DSRS and Pick and Patch activities and involvement.

Mr. Billson in his letter seemed to have also dismissed my personnel's copies of their pay slips with deseal/reseal allowance, confined space allowance and hazardous chemical allowance paid to them. He said DSRS allowances were paid to people because of adverse working conditions. I quote from his letter:

"Those working conditions which are not normally encountered by a member in his employment and which are unusually wet, dirty, cold or otherwise offensive and which require a member to adopt a stooped or cramped posture or to work in a place with poor ventilation."

In his view these allowances does not warrant the granting of an ex gratia payment. I would have thought if you were paid DSRS Allowance you did perform this type of work!! Wouldn't you?

Since Nov 2007, Mr. Shayne Neumann has become the new member for Blair and I have met with him and discussed the issues that I have mentioned above and given him copies of my letters and correspondence. He has been supportive and I believe his staff have sent you a letter regarding my concerns and a number of questions I put to him regarding some of the anomalies of the ex gratia payment eligibility criteria.

I submit the above information to the inquiry to provide you with accounts of my personal involvement during my time with the 482Sqn PS&MS Pick and Patch Program in an effort to support the people who worked for me during that time. I believe they have been overlooked for the ex gratia payment and ongoing medical assistance through VA along with other previous 482 Squadron and 1 & 6 Squadron personnel.

I am available to discuss this matter with the Inquiry Committee at any time to clarify any of these details. I also have in my possession copies of some of my personnel's pay slips which clearly shows that they were paid Deseal/Reseal Allowance, Hazardous Chemical Allowance and Confined Space Allowance during their time at 482 Squadron from 1987-1990.

Yours Sincerely,

*(Original Signed)*  
Bevan ( Jack) Victor