



**Submission No 56**

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

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[REDACTED]

24<sup>th</sup> June 2008

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### **INQUIRY INTO RAAF, F-111 DESEAL-RESEAL WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES.**

#### **Background**

During my service career I was employed in areas that were not considered to be directly involved with aircraft maintenance and as such, the sections and flights were termed Ground Equipment Maintenance Sections/Flights. My role at Air Command Headquarters (formerly Headquarters Operational Command) was largely an inspectorate role involving all the functions carried out by non aircraft trades.

With the benefit of hindsight, I now realize that a large number of personnel were exposed to toxic chemicals especially those employed in electroplating workshops, motor trimming, body building, surface finishing and motor transport fitters employed on aircraft refuelling equipment. Methyl Ethyl Ketone (MEK) and MEKP were widely used in motor trimming and surface finishing sections while MTFITTS employed on aircraft refuelling equipment or on fuel quality control duties were regularly doused or immersed in AVTUR while servicing or cleaning fuel tanks

Additionally, personnel employed in these sections at Amberley provided the manpower to:

- remove and replace the canvas covering on the air transportable hangar that housed the F111 deseal/reseal section on at least 3 occasions between 1979 and 1983, and
- during 1981 to 1983 dispose of the toxic waste from the first program which used SR51 as the desealer
- service and repair the equipment which was used to store and pump the various toxic chemicals used in the various deseal/reseal programs.

My personal involvement was as the officer in charge and I physically worked with my men on the 3 occasions in which we removed and replaced the canvas cladding on the hangar at "Stink City" and as OIC GEMF at 3 Aircraft Depot during which time I was tasked with the disposal of the highly toxic waste from the first (SR51) program. It was during this period of time that "we" developed a disposal method which involved mixing the waste with aviation turbine fuel (1:10) and burning it in a furnace located well away from other work areas. Unfortunately, I still have never sighted an MSDS for any of the chemicals used and consequently no personnel wore/used any PPE at the time. We all tolerated the foul odours and thought we were lucky not to be in the tanks. I was unfortunate enough on one occasion to be completely covered by the waste product when a hose burst but normally exposure was limited to contact with the hands and forearms as the waste drums were changed over. Mechanical equipment was not used to manoeuvre the drums of waste SR51 since a number of the drums were leaking and it was feared that they would rupture if not treated with "kid gloves".

Your records would indicate my involvement in more detail as I have made statements to the Court of Inquiry and to the Department of Veteran Affairs on my personal health problems.

## Considerations

The response requirements for this enquiry make clear that the only evidence that is likely to be able to be collected in this process will come from individuals during the hearing phase and I would ask that consideration be given to collecting evidence from all personnel associated with the use of toxic chemicals not just those employed at Amberley. Furthermore, I'm certain I, along with many others placed in category A by SHOAMP, received no compensation because we did not work in the aircraft tanks and I request that this approach be reviewed as I'm convinced that my former staff who worked every day on the disposal of the waste SR 51 product would have had equivalent exposure to those who worked in the aircraft tanks.

## Response to specific Terms of Reference

- Interim and final Health Scheme differences and transition arrangements

I am not fully conversant with the administrative details but for me personally, SHOAMP only provided some health care but my participation in the study did facilitate identification of some medical problems

- The timing of cessation of access to the Health Care Scheme

Since my personal health was not debilitating to the extent that I was unable to seek some employment; the timing was satisfactory but unfortunately, I know of men for whom help came too late and a number of marriages broke up because people did not know how to deal with the situation.

- The range of treatment and health benefits provided under the Health Care Scheme

I don't believe the range of treatment available under the Health Care Scheme was sufficient as in my case hypertension was not recognized and I continue to obtain treatment at my own expense even though depression was accepted.

- Whether the current Health Care Scheme is consistent with the range of treatment and health benefits available to persons under other Health Care Schemes

I believe I have no other claim for health benefits other than those provided by SHOAMP but I can state that the repeated medical tests and specialist referrals did cause me to become stressed out and I was very relieved at the end of the whole process. Unfortunately, a number of my former staff "fell by the wayside" as they were unable to cope with the whole process and some expressed the view that it was a fruitless exercise. This attitude was prevalent among those who were unable to maintain employment because of their physical and mental condition.

- The adequacy of the arrangements under the Health Care Scheme

I did not spend any time in the aircraft fuel tanks and yet despite being put in Category A, I have been excluded from health care for symptoms that are directly related to exposure to toxic chemicals. My quality of life and overall health did deteriorate in the mid 90s to the extent that I had to resign my permanent employment as an engineer with Brisbane City Council. Since 1996 I have endeavoured to gain an income from part time consultancy work and since my wife is an allied health professional; she and our children have endured my mood swings and flip/flop personality.

- The adequacy and equity of the financial element of the Ex Gratia Scheme

The linking of eligibility for the gratuity to the one narrow criterion of time spent in the fuel tanks is a far too narrow and I suggest it should have addressed the real problem: exposure to the toxic chemicals used in the program.

This submission is forwarded for my personal reasons and in the hope that the Federal Government will widen the scope of this study to include all workers exposed to the range of chemicals used in the F-111 and similar aircraft maintenance programs. Furthermore, the study should include the non aircraft trades who were involved in support functions such as the servicing of the ground support equipment used in the deseal/reseal programs as well canvas cladding replacement on hangars and the disposal of the toxic waste products at the completion of the programs. Particular emphasis should be placed on the disposal of the SR51 waste from the early program.

Yours Sincerely,

*Geoff Fellowes*

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