



Submission No 42

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

Name: Mr Mark Baker

Deseal Reseal support Group Member

DESEAL RESEAL – EXPOSURE OF A FIREFIGHTER

TRAINING:

I WAS YOUNG, FULL OF PRIDE, SEEKING ADVENTURE AND TRUSTING OF THOSE IN GOVERNMENT (MY EMPLOYER) TO PROTECT ME, AS WE PROTECTED OUR COUNTRIES WAY OF LIFE.

I commenced my Basic FireFtr course at RAAFSFS in early Aug 1988, completing the course in Nov 88.

I commenced my FireFtr Advanced Course (Postgraduate) in Mid Jan 93 completing the course in Feb 93.

During the Basic FIREFTR Course students were exposed to multiple fuel fires in open pits and steel structures ranging from 20 or so litres to hundreds of litres. These fires were fought using water as the extinguishing agent, meaning the fires took a long time to extinguish and the fuel mixtures were continually stirred up in the process; often with no respiratory protection (Breathing Apparatus) crews were exposed over and over to these fire scenarios as part of our Initial Employment Training (IET). As well as exposure to the burning by-products, we were continually exposed to the unburnt fuels and unknown mixtures of waste product. The students were tasked with the setting up of scenarios and distribution of the waste fuel/chemicals, under the direction of the instructors in readiness for the next crew's scenario. When not involved with the training scenario, students were relaxing in the rest area's a few metres from training and therefore continually breathing the fume rich atmosphere. During the practical phase our work uniform was cotton Jungle Greens. The only Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) used for handling contaminated fuel/chemical supplies was eye protection and Leather work gloves, however the gloves were supposed to be discarded once badly contaminated; this was generally only when they became totally useless and holed. After only a very short time, the fuel had been spilled and sloshed against our legs and clothing and into our boots.

The fuel was generally carried in open tin or plastic buckets and reused metal 20L containers with the tops removed and fitted with handles. Fuel supplies were of unknown origin to us during the Basic Course, varied in colour and had a variety of unidentified solids in them with unidentifiable odours. The fuels were usually supplied from the base contaminated fuel stockpiles or from tankers with contaminated supplies; we found this out later in our career training. This fuel was also distributed to the larger pits by students rolling 200L drums to the pit edge and opening the bungs whilst we balanced the drum on the edge, this exposed us to a lot of splash back, fumes and unidentified coloured liquids and slimy semi solids; we did however have our leather rigger gloves for protection and the consensus was there was nothing that could really hurt us, as there was no way they would have given it to us to use if it could!

During Fire Fighting, students would often be required to wade through high ankle and deeper water and fuel mixtures in order to fight and extinguish the fires, this required pushing the flames from the liquid surface using the water streams and overflowing high difficult to get to fire fuel containers to knock the fire to our level where we could get at it; didn't we get showered. The Firefighter boots worn at the time were leather, calf height and not waterproof. We had a fire coat made from wool, a helmet with visor and leather rigger's gloves for firefighting protection. This PPE became impregnated with fuels and water very quickly and remained soaked for the duration of the training, or until a long enough break in training allowed us to dry them out some. Even after drying they remained contaminated. PPE was washed, as was the cotton jungle green uniforms; however this only removed limited amounts of contamination and due to all clothing being washed together a gross amount of cross contamination occurred.

The FireFtr Advanced Course was run in similar fashion, the only differences being, we had a new type of blue cotton uniform which had been treated with a product to make it less flammable – we still had no outer garment to cover our leg area not protected by the fire coat.

We did have improved helmets and visor, which was good, as the early models had a habit of the visor's distorting and melting if getting too hot for too long. The contamination of work uniforms, PPE and leather boots did not change. Many Firefighters posted into the Amberley area continued to be exposed to similar products for some time; the rest of us continued to be contaminated in the same way to our base supplies of waste Aviation fuels and other products needing to be got rid of, still not yet fully realising what the exposure was doing to us. *WE HAD YOUTHFUL TRUST IN THOSE EMPLOYING AND LEADING US.*

Effects

Many of us have ails and ills, but it was ignored as the norm, when some died of unusual illness and Cancers, the penny hadn't dropped for most of us, it was nothing more than bad luck; it wasn't till the investigation into the Reseal Deseal program and its health effects, that some of us started to wonder and to look at our own ills, not as isolated incidents, but rather as a whole.

My personal story started with an innocent comment made by a medical staff member, whilst I received yet another inoculation prior to deploying overseas in 2000.

The comment was "are you alright, are you in pain" I was quite relaxed at the time waiting on them to finish sticking me and stated I felt fine; the staff member said the skin area of my arm was jumping around in a strange way. I thought little of it.

When overseas I became aware of a slight tremor in my hands that I had noticed for a while back in Australia had become quite pronounced and was getting worse. I went to medical to get it checked and the Doctor was shocked at the tremor and took blood to have my Thyroids checked for over activity.

The result was not extraordinary but it was suggested it be checked again when returning home; life went on with very unsteady hands.

On return to Australia all was forgotten, there were other fights and bouts of inter-mustering jealousy to deal with. Then began the big investigation into Reseal Deseal, some of the stories I began to hear and symptoms people were telling of startled me and made me think that what I thought were isolated issues may in fact be linked.

The following are the individual issues I had been dealing with and others that have manifested over time.

Main Medical issues

Tremors – hands, arms, legs, and feet. Generally exacerbated by Exercise (use of arms and legs, especially anything of a strength demanding nature), Stress (High stress especially bad) and time out working in hot and humid weather. At times severe uncontrolled movements of legs and especially right foot making vehicle control difficult.

Cramps – Through out the entire body, can be in places not possible to stretch out, are mostly unexpected and can be brought on by something as minor as a yawn or a sneeze. The worst has been in the rear neck shoulder area that has caused severe symptoms, similar to those described by persons having a heart attack. EG; extremely severe pain from neck area radiating down to lumbar kidney area and radiating out to mostly the right, but sometimes either arm and resulting in tingling and numbness in the hand and arm.

This is generally of a short 1 to 2 minute time frame and is so painful it is difficult to almost impossible to breathe and I generally don't. I usually (if not driving) curl up and wait for it to pass.

Spasms and Fasciculations (movements of fine muscles near the skin surface) – Through out the entire body including face, Spasms in some large muscle groups causing the entire limbs and muscles to move and others that cause small movement of minor muscles.

Hearing – Understanding the spoken word (disseminating speech), especially on the phone with any other competing sounds, or if speech is reasonably quiet, and most other times when there's conflicting speech or sounds. My speech often feels trapped in my head as my ear drums tighten to protect my hearing way too quickly, especially when trying to talk over noises or people. I seem to have little indication of the level of my speech and have been told I'm talking loudly or too softly.

Noises and speech can at times be distracting, cause confusion, frustration and often pain, causing me to try and get away from it. I have difficulty picking the direction of sounds also and I often hear sound (high pitched or unusual frequency noise that others apparently don't). Also if anger or frustration rises, or I need to raise my voice, there is a very distinct scratching fluttering noise on my ear drums.

These in Italics may or may not have anything to do with Chemical exposure, but considering mans knowledge of Toxins, who really knows?

***Cervical disks replaced** – Replaced due to excessive ware and tear, severe headaches, long term pinched nerves in shoulder area and left arm and the onset of numbness and pain in left hand and arm. Numbness and pain appears now to have become permanent.*

***Severe Headaches neck and shoulder pain** – generally after any exercise, mainly in neck, left shoulder, at the base of the scull in cervical spine area and radiating up and out around scull. Scalp gets very sensitive. Was helped due to some cervical spine disk replacements; however, I have been unable to be taken off the drugs to help with control of inflammation and pain. Recently I have had a return of most of the original pain symptoms prior to the operation. EG; long term headaches as described, that can last for many days and only be dulled with medication over and above daily medicines.*

***Difficulty in speech** – Since the Cervical operation I often get a feeling of choking, speech becomes husky and hoarse after a short time and I get a feeling of swelling in throat during and after exercise.*

Memory – I'm often told things and if I don't write it down will regularly forget it and have no recollection of being told. Will be going to do something and forget along the way what it was, and even returning to the original spot I was at, still can't remember. Forgetting to do things that have been every day minor tasks; EG; leaving car and house unlocked, windows down, drugs at home, or mobile phone. Often these are just minor stupid things, but are almost daily occurrences. As time passes they are becoming more than minor issues. I often completely lose track of what I am talking about mid sentence and can not recall it. Often cannot think of common, even simple titles, phrases and words in conversations. I can not at time recall if I have done something, so will often need to go back – at time this may be some distance just to ensure I have, because I can't recall if I had done it or not.

Mood swings & Confusion – Frustration, depression and aggression, often not being aware of it, or not caring (not normal) Sometimes will cool down if it is pointed out to me. Antidepressants help a lot, but are not full proof.

Erectile and sexual dysfunction

Very atrophic left testicle with pain - As with most other things, may need removal, but nil cause found, possible toxic exposure suggested by specialist

Testosterone diagnosed very low – Proven with blood tests, nil cause found, has been raised to good level with supplement. Hasn't had a dramatic change in sexual dysfunction.

Muscle pain after severe cramps and exercise – Whilst I had been run / walking regularly – this has fallen to an irregular activity, but I try as often as possible. The result is I continually get pains similar to those you get if you have not exercised for some time.

A feeling of, and muscle weakness - Muscles used to often feel weak but when I test or use them they seem ok; however they have now become completely exhausted after short bursts of demand and often not of a very demanding nature. Just walking a short time carrying a minor or medium load, I will be feeling and panting like I just finished a sprint, with my muscles feeling like useless rubber bands. After a short burst of exercise I am completely exhausted. I may at times however recover fairly quickly, other times it takes much longer.

Broken sleep and irregularly bad snoring – Broken sleep almost every night; even with the trial of two different sleeping sedatives. Nightmares, acting out and aggressive sleep talking have begun to occur on a regular basis and waking up in confusion as to what day it is and what I believe I have to do has often already occurred. Not hard to prove this one, just ask my wife!

Dyslexia type issues – Mixing up of letters and numbers, reading them, then writing, typing or dialling the phone with something different and at time two or three times in a row after noting it.

Body temperature control problems – I am often sweating and feel very hot when others aren't. I sweat with very minor exercise or movements and sometimes it seems related to stress levels in some way, also it happens on being put under pressure to quickly do or recall something.

Eye problems – having the feeling of something in your eyes constantly and especially in bright light, seeing microscopic hairs moving around in your sight when looking at any light surface and having dry stinging eyes nearly all the time especially when air is moving past them. This has now degraded dramatically.

Dental problems – issues arisen due to drugs and illness with my teeth; cracking and accelerated decay.

Effects on family and self

The effects on family are varied, but not one of them is fair or positive, nor are they to blame; yet sometimes they do anyway and often can't be convinced of otherwise. This is not just my issue, it is our issue, it affects us all. That's what families do.

Seven plus years

Fighting with bureaucratic Departments that have it so wrong, admit they no nothing of an issue, say things are set in stone and can not be changed and then change the rules anyway to suit some agenda when cornered.

I'm a lucky one, I was blessed with a small something from the Lump Sum debacle, many others didn't.....?

Drug taking,

Arguing,

Being abused by self important specialist,

Being lied to,

Insinuations of it being in my head, even with some of the symptoms were plainly seen,

Being told "I give up" by the experts,

Being told by a specialist to give up work, lessen the stress and concentrate on something that I, can handle,

Having to convince specialists you are not making it up,

Being told it can't possibly have anything to do with toxins by someone who openly states they know nothing about toxins,

Researching,

Documenting,

Self investigating,

Obtaining your own documentary evidence to show the specialists they are wrong when they refuse to believe you,

Fighting procrastinating specialist over long period to get the simplest answer or test carried out as promised,

Fighting with bureaucratic Departments, who appear to be willing to do anything in order to not accept liability?

Dealing with puffed up self important D.V.A appointed so called medical professionals, who are able to suggest a diagnose in 30 – 40 minutes, which true specialists have been unable to do in six years, Learning to deal with multiple General Practitioners as they never seem to stay long in the Military system despite promises made and all good intentions, and

Learning to deal with medical administration personally, as current Defence system seems not able to deal with long term illnesses or investigation.

Diagnosis

Mar 2008 – Diagnosis of a rare acquired disorder called Morvan's / Isaac's Syndrome.

(only 14 cases of Morvan's documented since the 1900's)

In a nut shell, this is an auto immune disorder affecting the nervous system, where the body fails to recognise its own cells and produces antibodies to attack them. A known documented cause; Toxic exposure.....you do the math?

The current treatment is weekly Plasma Exchanges and steroid treatment to suppress the immune system and many other drugs for the other symptoms and side effects.

Conclusion

This ordeal whilst still not yet over, is not unlike living a never ending Nightmare that you just can't wake up from; just when you think you see a light at the end of the tunnel, it turns out to only be a Firefly.

This illness has an affect on every day of your life in some or many ways, things that you have done easily for most of your life are suddenly extremely difficult or not possible to do any longer; you suffer some sort of consequence every time you push yourself to do something you aught not, just to try and prove your not a bludger or a liability.

You continually feel you might be going crazy and it appears there are no answers or anyone that wants to help you. Most of the issues you deal with daily are not able to be seen by the average person. You are forced at times to consider making a choice, to fight or to just give up and end it all? Yes it happens to the strongest of personalities; you often feel so alone and that nobody can understand.

My career is now in its last days after twenty plus years of passionate service through no fault of my own.

Who cares? Just the few it directly affects, most are just too overworked to care or help.

Yes it has an affect on you and yes it has an affect on your family, yes it has an affect on your marriage and on your career, yes your family have to suffer along with you..... or leave you; this is the choice they have to make.

Mark Baker

Member of the F111 Deseal Reseal Support group

Firefighter

Royal Australian Air Force

Jun 2008