

Introduction

Conduct of the Inquiry

- 1.1 On 21 May 2008, the Minister for Veteran's Affairs, the Hon Alan Griffin MP, wrote to the Chairman of the Joint Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Senator Michael Forshaw, noting that:

One of the election commitments of the Rudd Government was that it would conduct a Parliamentary Inquiry into the adequacy of the ...health and support needs of RAAF Deseal/Reseal workers and their families.
- 1.2 The Minister's letter included Terms of Reference for the Inquiry 'prepared with reference to the concerns raised in a submission recently provided by the F-111 Deseal/Reseal Support Group Inc and also the intent of the Government's commitment'. A summary of the Terms of Reference together with a strategy of approach to the Inquiry was included on the Committee's first media release announcing a series of public hearings to be held in Canberra and Brisbane.
- 1.3 The Inquiry Terms of Reference were adopted by the Committee on 28 May 2008 and referred to the Defence Sub-Committee chaired by Arch Bevis MP. The Inquiry was advertised widely in the national and Queensland press and in publications with wide distribution among the Defence serving personnel and veterans' communities.
- 1.4 The Committee received 130 submissions and 12 Supplementary submissions from organisations and the general public. In all the Committee received 743 pages of submissions. Published submissions are

available on the Committee's website. A list of all submissions, exhibits and witnesses is included as Appendices A, B and C.

- 1.5 The Committee also heard evidence recorded in more than 360 pages of transcript evidence covering six public hearings.
- 1.6 After hearing initially from the Government agencies directly involved in the Deseal/Reseal (DSRS) issue, the Departments of Defence, Veterans' Affairs, and the Commonwealth Ombudsman, in Canberra on 21 July 2008, the Committee held two public hearings in Brisbane on 28 and 29 July 2008.
- 1.7 The Committee visited Amberley RAAF base on 28 July 2008. The Committee received a private briefing on the nature of fuel leak repair work and inspected training facilities, tools used and an F-111 airframe. Inspection of the various fuel storage areas in the F-111 provided a very graphic understanding of the extremely small work spaces for those involved in this work. Entry to some fuel tanks would make it difficult for even a small person to undertake this work. Once inside the tanks, some work areas were so confined, it is difficult to understand how personnel could spend hours at a time in such a cramped and physically unpleasant environment. To do so with a range of chemicals surrounding them on a hot Queensland summer day would have been very demanding.
- 1.8 In opening the first Brisbane hearing on 28 July 2008, the Chair noted that they provided an opportunity for 'those who were involved, who have first-hand experience and who participated in the DSRS program in its various guises and in different parts, to present their case in an open and transparent public hearing to the committee'.¹
- 1.9 Another public hearing was held in Canberra on 19 September 2008 and provided the Committee with an opportunity to revisit a range of issues with the relevant Government agencies as well as from organisations representing the interests of servicemen and veterans. A total of 47 witnesses were examined at the public hearings in Canberra and Brisbane.
- 1.10 On 25 November 2008, the Chair wrote to the Minister requesting an extension of time for the Committee to report after the 4 December date could not be met due to the complexity of matters under consideration.
- 1.11 The Committee held further public hearings on Thursday and Friday 16 and 17 April 2009, at which it took evidence from expert witnesses who were responsible for the research behind the health studies commissioned by the SHOAMP. The Committee also heard further evidence from the

1 Chair, Hon A R Bevis MP, *Transcript*, 28 July 2008, p. 1.

Deseal/Reseal Support Group Inc and from the Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs.

- 1.12 This Inquiry has taken longer than was first anticipated. Throughout the extended timeline in which this Inquiry was conducted, a steady stream of submissions and information was received. The Committee sought to examine each of these, often involving further analysis and research.
- 1.13 The nature of this Inquiry required a detailed consideration of specific provisions of the various compensation and support schemes available to Defence personnel at various times over the last three decades. In addition, specific schemes created for the DSRS and wider F-111 fuel leak workforce were examined in some detail. The relationship each of these had with the other was also reviewed.
- 1.14 The Committee has been mindful that unlike most Inquiries conducted by parliamentary committees; this Inquiry went well beyond broad policy issues. At its core, has been a consideration of specific cases directly impacting on upwards of 2 000 ex-personnel and many more family members.
- 1.15 The Committee is appreciative of the willingness of so many current and former RAAF personnel, their families and others to come forward with evidence and to tell their story in their own words. For some this was a difficult thing to do. The work of the Committee would not have been possible but for their evidence and submissions.
- 1.16 The RAAF and DVA were also forthcoming in support of the Inquiry. From the outset, their frank and open evidence, and their willingness to provide many additional details and evidence at the request of the Committee is acknowledged and appreciated.
- 1.17 In particular, the support of senior RAAF personnel has facilitated the work of the Committee at all times and has been appreciated.
- 1.18 Given the wide range of views about the matters canvassed in this Inquiry, some of which are irreconcilable, it is clearly not possible to produce a report that will meet with approval from all. That said, this report is a thorough and genuine effort to consider the available research and competing views and to provide the Government with a series of recommendations, which if adopted, would bring greater fairness and equity to the treatment of many ex F-111 workers.
- 1.19 Interestingly, a search to identify any similar inquiry of these matters in the USA was only able to identify reports in *The New York Times* in 1988 that mentioned:

“The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is preparing to investigate health complaints by aerospace workers”.²

- 1.20 These hearings were held 6 March and 5 July 1989 in Los Angeles.³ The witnesses outlined their experiences at Boeing and Lockheed plants, generally within the previous 10 years. The US Senate Committee does not appear to have produced a report. Some twenty years later, this report is being presented to the Australian Parliament.
- 1.21 The issues before this Inquiry are not new. RAAF, governments and the people directly involved have grappled with them for many years. It is now time to finalise the issue.
- 1.22 A timeline of the key events which have defined these issues is as follows:

**F-111 Deseal/Reseal
Key Dates**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1973	The first F-111C aircraft arrive in Australia
1973 – 2000	Treatment of fuel leaks using ‘pick and patch’ methods
1977 - 1982	First DSRS program
1985 - 1992	‘Wings’ program
1991 - 1993	Second DSRS program
1996 - 1999	Spray Seal program
28 January 2000	Spray Seal program suspended
July 2000	BOI convened by CAF
8 September 2001	BOI report released
2001	Interim Health Care Scheme (IHCS) instituted
2002 – 2004	Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel
December 2004	Government accepts responsibility of DSRS health outcomes
December 2004	SHOAMP Health Care Scheme instituted
August 2005	Ex-gratia lump sum scheme announced
21 May 2008	Inquiry referred to Defence Sub-Committee

- 2 New York Times (13 November 1988) *Illnesses of Aircraft Workers to be Discussed* viewed 17 May 2008 at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=940DE6DF123FF930A25752C1A96E948260>.
- 3 *Hearings before the Subcommittee on Toxic Substances, Environmental Oversight, Research and Development of the Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate, One Hundred First Congress, first session, March 6, 1989; July 5, 1989.*