



**Submission No 22**

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

**Name: Mr Alan Aburn**

Parliamentary Inquiry into F111 Deseal-Reseal Workers and their F...

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(Cover for § 44)

**Subject:** Parliamentary Inquiry into F111 Deseal-Reseal Workers and their Families

**From:** Alan Aburn

**Date:** Mon, 16 Jun 2008 17:55:05 +1000

**To:** The Secretary of the Parliamentary Inquiry for the F111 Deseal-Reseal Workers and Families <jscfadt@aph.gov.au>

Dear Secretary to the Parliamentary Inquiry,

Attached is a submission for consideration by the Parliamentary Inquiry into the F111 Deseal-Reseal Workers and their Families. The submission is made on behalf of My Son Kevin Gregory Aburn (Greg) My self Alan David Robert Aburn and Families of Deceased F111 Deseal-Reseal Fuel Tank Leak Repairers.

With regard to the Terms of Reference for the subject Inquiry, I raise issues with regard to :

- The Inequity of the F111 Ex-Gratia payment scheme for Deseal-Reseal Workers
- Tier Category's for Eligibility for the Ex-Gratia Payment
- Acceptance of Documents of Proof in the absence of formal F111 Servicing Documentation
- The dealings of The Department of Veterans' Affairs in the process of Compensation Claims
- The Health Care Scheme shut-out of workers who's health has failed after the Registration Cut off date
- Inquiry in to Health Issues of Spouses and other family member of Deseal-Reseal Workers.

Previous correspondence to past Ministers for Veterans' Affairs along with this correspondence, other statements and documentation relevant to these issues will be sent by separate registered posted mail.

Please advise if there are additional comments required.

Yours Sincerely

Alan Aburn

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16 June 2008

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Defence Sub-Committee Secretariat  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2602

Dear Sir/Madam

**PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO F111 DESEAL-RESEAL WORKERS  
COMENSATION AND EX-GRATIA PAYMENTS ISSUES**

References:

- A. Ex-Gratia F111 Deseal/Reseal Lump Sum Payments Scheme of August 2005, Definitions and Eligibility
- B. SHOAMP Report on the General Health and Medical Study dated September 2004

1. My name is Alan David (Robert) Aburn. I served 28 years and 7 months in the RAAF as an Aircraft Electrician Fitter. I was promoted through the ranks to WOFF and then accepted a Commission Officer rank of Flight Lieutenant in 1982. I was involved with F111 aircraft from 1973 and was a member of the third ferry flight that brought six aircraft from America. As an Electrical Fitter I was responsible, among other aircraft systems, for the Fuel Management Systems on the F111 aircraft. This included Fuel Contents, Fuel Quantity, Fuel Distribution, Fuel Transfer and Fuel Dump Systems. As a result, I and other Aircraft Electrical Fitters worked with and in conjunction with the Aircraft Airframe Fitters/ATECH1's on many of the fuel system problems experienced on the F111 aircraft.

2. I have made many representations in writing to the various incumbent Ministers for Veterans' Affairs, directly and through the local Member for Blair since September 2005. These were made on behalf of my son Kevin Gregory Aburn's family (*he was always known as Greg*). Greg was a FSGT Aircraft Technician (ATECH1). He died on 1 February 2000 following a 16 month battle with Grade 2, Dukes Stage 'C' Carcinoma of the Sigmoid Colon (Sigmoid Colon Cancer).

3. Greg joined the RAAF in November 1976 and after formal ATECH1 training at RAAF School of Technical Training at Forest Hill in NSW, was posted to Pearce in Western Australia in March 1978. He was promoted to CPL in May 1984 and was posted to No 1 Squadron at Amberley in January 1985. He was promoted to SGT in 1991 and served at 1 SQN till he was transferred to 501 Wing at Amberley in April 1994 as the Sgt in charge R4 Servicing on F111 aircraft and then on to F111 Wings Section in August 1996. He was transferred to RAAF Base Williamtown in July 1997. During his eleven and a half years at Amberley he was employed on F111 maintenance tasks which included many F111 fuel tank entries to carry out 'pick and patch' fuel tank leak repairs.

4. During a meeting at the Ipswich RSL on 9 September, the previous Veterans Affairs Minister, Bruce Billson advised that formal F111 aircraft documentation prior to 1992 had been destroyed and went on to say that proof of involvement was necessary before approval could be

granted for the ex-gratia payment. One of Greg's former supervisors advised the Minister at this meeting that he had directed Greg Aburn to carry out F111 fuel tank leak repair (pick and patch) tasks on numerous occasions during his period at No 1 SQN. Following this I asked whether Statutory Declarations by fuel tank repair workers' supervisors would be accepted as proof of workers involvement with F111 Deseal/Reseal (DSRS) and aircraft fuel tank leak repair activities in the absence of destroyed/unavailable formal aircraft documentation. Minister Bruce Billson stated that Statutory Declarations under these circumstances would be accepted. I have obtained two Statutory Declarations from two of Greg's former supervisors that describe the nature of Greg's activities in fuel tank leak repairs. Copies of these statements are attached as Attachments 1 and 2

5. I question the veracity and fairness of the Definitions of Eligibility in the Terms of Reference (*Reference A*) for the F111 DSRS Participation for the purpose of the lump sum payment scheme and the Detailed Description of Exposure Criteria. The Ex-gratia payments were to be made in recognition of the difficulties that workers suffered in the environment in which they had to work in association with the DSRS activities they had to carry out. I have several issues of dispute,

- a. **My main concern is in regard to** the cut of date of 8 September 2001 for widows and/or the executors of the estates of deceased F111 DSRS participants. I understand that this date was chosen to coincide with the release of the RAAF's F111 DSRS Board of Inquiry Report.
- b. Since the RAAF's F111 DSRS Board of Inquiry investigated work practices and how these practices affected the health of fuel tank repair workers, it seems inappropriate and unfair to exclude the families of members involved in these activities who died prior to the release of this report. The members who died prior to the release of the report would have been considered during the investigation and would have been the subject of the report itself
- c. I cannot understand why this date was set at completion of the Board of Inquiry, as the Board was well aware of personnel that were involved with DSRS activities had died. Greg Aburn was one of them, because I had submitted evidence to that Inquiry on his behalf and I was aware of 4-5 other personnel who had also passed away at that time. Faced with this one can only believe that this was a deliberate move to exclude these members families/estates from making a claim. This is totally unacceptable, not justifiable and distinctly unfair. The only difference between those in-eligible prior to 8 September and those eligible after that date is the date that they died.
- d. This is hardly addresses the spirit of the ex-gratia payment - that was offered in recognition of the special nature of the circumstances associated with the DSRS activities, working in cramped and confined spaces as well as being exposed to toxic chemicals. Veterans Affairs Minister Bruce Billson advised during a DSRS Support Group Committee Meeting 18 September 2006 at Waterfront Place Eagle St Brisbane, that he would consider an *act of grace payment* to the widows of deceased DSRS workers. So far nothing has come of this. The Minister believed that there was only four deceased members and asked to be provided with the names of other deceased members. The Brisbane Office of Department of Veterans' Affairs forwarded a list of 38 names of deceased members associated with DSRS activities to Mr Philip Connole, an advisor to the then Minister for Veterans Affairs Bruce Billson on 8 Oct 07. Nothing further has become of this thus far. There have been additional deaths since this date.

- e. In fairness to these widows and family estates I advocate that this cut off date be set aside/deleted. If there has to be a cut off date it should be set at the date the when first F111 aircraft arrived in Australia in 1973, of if this is unacceptable for any sound reason it should be no later than the start of the DSRS program which began in 1978.
- f. **Another area of concern** is in regard to the Tier 1 and 2 categorization of personnel involved with Fuel Tank leak repairs. The SHOAMP Health study placed no exposure levels or periods of exposure, but someone somewhere has applied these categories based on timed exposure. With regard to these categories what was the methodology used in setting these parameters and who and what were their qualifications to do so? If a person is exposed to the toxic chemicals they are exposed. I believe that the Minister/s have been poorly advised by biased and self opinionated members of Defence Staff as to who qualifies as Tier 1 or Tier 2 or Tier none category without understanding the actual tasks and conditions that workers were subjected to.
- g. Reference A, Paragraph 3 of the Eligibility Definitions for each category described personnel working on sealant rework ('pick and patch') activities inside F111 aircraft fuselage fuel tanks for a cumulative period of either, not less than 60 for Tier1 and not less than 30 working days for Tier 2, assessed personnel while attached to a **DSRS Section of 501WG, over the period 1973 to 2000**, as well as those personnel posted to Sacramento who completed training in DSRS procedures. *I point out here that 501 Wing was not formed until the early 1980's and that the 3AD DSRS Section was formed in 1978 and then it became the 501 Wing DSRS Section when 3AD was restructured to 501Wing in 1980. As such there were no DSRS Sections until 1978.* The DSRS Section was only established to relieve the extreme effort by Operation level maintenance personnel caused by the chronic leaks that were being experienced across the whole fleet of F111 aircraft. The decision was to completely strip the fuel tank sealants and to completely reseal the tanks with new sealant. Maintenance work on F111 fuel tank leaks prior to this programme was known as 'Pick and Patch' Repairs, was carried out mostly by fully trained ATECH1 tradesmen, well qualified to carry out this type of work, from the time that the F111 aircraft arrived in Australia from the USA in 1973, until and even after all aircraft had undergone one or another form of the various full DSRS repairs. These pick and patch repairs have been described as 'Ad-Hoc'. The meaning of this term can open for misunderstanding and/or misinterpretation, in this application it is used to describe that F111 fuel tank leak repairs were carried out on 'an as requirement, un-scheduled work', that was needed to fix the aircraft so they could meet their operational programmes. Some of these fully Desealed and Resealed aircraft subsequently developed leaks after completion and had to be repaired at operational and other deeper level maintenance venues as pick and patch repairs. While aircraft were undergoing the full DSRS repairs (*I believe there were only two aircraft completed per year*) the remaining aircraft at the operational Squadrons 1, 6 and 481 Squadrons as well as 3AD/501Wing were still leaking and were being repaired as required by means of 'pick and patch' repairs so that aircraft could meet their operational requirements. The nature of these 'pick and patch' repairs required technicians to enter into whichever aircraft fuel tank was leaking. The work methods and conditions used were very primitive using scrapers and dental picks to remove the sealant. Workers were not provided with full proper personal protective clothing and breathing masks to protect from the softening agents, cleaning chemicals and sealants used. The tanks regularly had fuel residues remaining in the tanks, so workers were also exposed to fuel fumes that contained carcinogenic additives as well. Ventilation was provided with a

'Hokhansen' air blower. When working in small cramped areas within the tanks the breathing masks were often removed for visual and physical inspection and work access. Workers in these activities were exposed to heavy residue fuel, toxic chemical and sealant fumes used in carrying out this task. A general practice when reapplying the sealant was to spit on the fingers to smooth out the sealant and to ensure that it adhered to the joining surfaces. When doing this ingestion of the sealant material was very likely. Supervisors at 1 and 6 SQN's have advised that there would have been the equivalent of 2-3 aircraft off line per year to affect pick and patch repairs, therefore, these were not trivial occurrences, it accounted for similar work effort as for the DSRS programmes itself and for a longer overall period.

- h. The Reference B, SHOAMP Report makes many references to the 'pick and patch' activity and acknowledges that these workers may have worked for much longer periods than the members involved in the formal DSRS programs. **Paragraph 1.2.1.2** on page 8 of the SHOAMP Report states that: *'it is recognised that that some individuals may have spent more time on pick and patch than on formal DSRS, paragraph. Paragraph 2.3.1.2 states: Pick and Patch was an on going 'ad hoc' activity which would have been very difficult to identify, so personnel who performed this task outside of the formal DSRS Programme were not included in the study. However, this does not imply that results from the Health Study will not be applicable to this group of individuals.* In Paragraph 17.5 in the fourth unnumbered paragraph it quotes: *It is worth mentioning that although the current study enrolled only those who participated in a formal DSRS programme, the results may be relevant to those personnel involved in 'ad hoc' or Pick and Patch type repairs.* Unfortunately there are those that have denigrated the pick and patch work effort, and what they have offered the Ministers in reality is only their unexperienced personal and biased opinion without addressing exactly what was undertaken.
- i. With regard to Reference A, Ex-gratia Payments have been made to Incinerator Operators, Firemen, Fuel Tanker Drivers, various Equipment Personnel and other personnel not associated with the entry of F111 fuel tanks and to work in cramped confined spaces that were toxic environments. Yet there is a commitment to deny payment to operational Squadrons 1, 6, 481 and 3AD/501WG deeper level maintenance venue workers involved with 'pick and patch' repairs who did indeed enter cramped confined spaces and toxic environments, as well personnel also exposed to the toxic chemicals whose normal place of employment was in hangers 255, 260, 277 or 278.
- j. I was employed in these hangers as my normal work place as well as being sought to assist in the setting up some of the electrical equipment used in the programme at the 'Rag Hangar'. My duties there involved checking and monitoring the electrical pump motors and heaters used to pump SR51 and other chemicals into and out of the fuel tanks to soften old and degraded sealant and to flush residues from the tanks. Water Picks used to remove more stubborn residues were also used. The electric motors on these pumps and heaters were designed and made in the USA for use on 240 VAC @ 60 Hertz mains supplies. Available power at the 'Rag Hangar' was 415/240 VAC @ 50 Hertz. This supply caused the motors to run slower and to draw higher electrical current from the mains supply. This caused the motors to run very hot, and during the warmer months of operation to give off smoke and the smell of burnt insulation. The NCOi/c of the DSRS Section requested assistance regarding these pump motors as he was concerned that they could burn out. I spent considerable time to check out, monitor and set up operation times for the various pumps and other USA electrical

equipment. During this period I was sprayed with SR51 and other chemicals due to leakage from the fuel tanks and coupling hoses. A Statutory Declaration from the NCOi/c DSRS Section relating to the duties that I performed at that location is attached as Attachment 3. He considered that my activities were essential for the ongoing operation and functions of this equipment and was a vital part of the program. My claim for these duties within the DSRS activities has been rejected without a valid explanation as to why.

6. Although I have provided other statements from myself and other witnesses as well as Statutory Declarations there seems to be reluctance by officials within Department of Veterans' Affairs to accept these Declarations as proof of duties and activities associated with F111 DSRS fuel tank leak repair activities. I was under the impression that Statutory Declarations are a legal and proper document and I would like to be informed who will not accept this level of proof, why it is not acceptable and what is their reluctance to accepting them as statements of proof of the activities carried out in the absence of formal F111 aircraft documentation.

7. I was invited on the Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP) committee by the head of DVA Claims Section Canberra, Mr Bill Maxwell and from this was nominated as the SHOAMP Committees Representative on the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) that monitored and co-ordinated the health study conducted by TUNRA. My concerns while on these committees were in relation to making sure that the family interests of other deceased DSRS fuel tank leak technician/repairers were not overlooked and to provide an oversight for their interests. This position was recognised by Ministers De-Anne Kelly and Bruce Billson as well as the current Minister Alan Griffin. I have a good understanding of the processes involved in the development of the Health study and the processes involved with the analysis and assessment of the data collected and the development of the various SHOAMP Study Reports.

8. The SAC was comprised of a group of eminent medical specialists representing a wide range of medical fields. They contributed to, and endorsed the findings SHOAMP Report. The Report indicated that exposed personnel would present with a range of medical conditions and that this in itself was an indication of their toxic chemical exposure that they had encountered while working in the F111 DSRS programme and fuel tank leak repair activities. Yet when any exposed worker made claims through Veterans Affairs for the multiple medical conditions that they presented with, the processing delegate would arrange appointments with specialists for specific medical conditions. The specialist generally acknowledged that the member was indeed suffering from the particular medical condition, but that specialist could/would not associate the particular condition with exposure to toxic chemicals. This process waters down the claimant's overall medical health status. The outcome was that claims for each specific medical condition claimed for would be rejected. When a senior delegate was asked why the medical complaints a member was claiming for could not be considered and assessed as an overall loss of health due to toxic chemical exposure. The response was that, that was how they had been directed to process the claims individually for each medical condition. Unfortunately there is no Statement of Principles (SoP) covering toxic chemical exposure. These claims for multiple medical conditions arising from toxic chemical exposure should be assessed by a competent Specialist whose expertise is in the field of toxic chemical exposures such as an environmental health medicine specialist. These claims could be assessed under Section 180A of the Veterans Entitlement Act where all conditions and their effect could be assessed as one issue.

9. The Health Care Scheme for affected F-111 DSRS fuel tank leak repair workers has been closed off to new applicants from 20 September 2005. As workers that were fine and in good health prior to this cut off date, find that when they too have subsequently develop medical conditions/problems associated with the F-111 fuel leak work activities at a later date are unable

to register. They are then left in a very detrimental and untenable situation were they are unable to get similar medical coverage and treatment as others involved in the same work as them. The metabolism of some people reacts differently to common work activity exposures that others carrying out the same tasks have experienced. So dates that specifically deny these workers proper medical care as others employed on the same tasks is divisive and very unfair. As far as I am aware of there is no comment or time periods set in the SHOAMP Report that states or implies when exposed personnel would fall ill from their work activities by a particular time period after exposure. The shut out date for the Health Care Scheme should be discarded to allow all F111 DSRS fuel tank leak repair workers to be eligibly for adequate health care irrespective to when they become ill.

10. My correspondence to the various current and past Veterans' Affairs Ministers relevant to these issues has resulted in no sensible or satisfactory responses thus far. Correspondence from these Ministers has been very tardy, taken about four months for a reply and when received does not provide answers to the specific points that were raised. I have not received a reply to my letter of the 1 Jun 2007 to Minister Bruce Billson, and although the addressee no longer has the portfolio I would still expect an answer from the department. I have written to the new Minister for Veterans' Affairs Alan Griffin on 15 Feb 08 and I have a reply dated 17 Apr 08 stating that he has asked his department to undertake a review of both mine and my sons claim in light of the Statutory Declarations that I forwarded to him and attached here. He advised that he will write again when he has an outcome to those deliberations. He stated that many of the issues that I have raised relate to matters that he would expect to be considered by the Parliamentary Inquiry. I can only hope this is the case for the sake of all families of deceased F111 fuel tank leak repair workers.

11. The Department of Veterans Affairs was to conduct a health study for Spouses and other family members of F111 DSRS fuel tank leak repairers. To-date there seems to be no starting date for this study although spouses and families were required to fill out questionnaires associated with their health concerns for the health study contractors. My late son's wife has suffered a number of medical health issues which may be linked to his exposure to F111 DSRS toxic chemical exposure. A similar situation exists with my grand daughter who has significant health issues. I am also aware that numerous spouses/families of DSRS workers also have a variety health issues that may have been caused by exposure to spouses clothing and spousal exposure to the toxic chemicals involved with their work. Will this study ever be carried out?

12. I have provided under separate mailing all relevant correspondence and documentation with the current and past Ministers for Veterans' Affairs relevant to my statements here that may be usefully in the evaluation of my case and for the situation relating to other widows of deceased F111 DSRS. This is attached as Attachment 5. (Not forwarded with this Email)



13. I would welcome the opportunity to comment further on the points raised here at the Parliamentary Inquiry hearings in Brisbane on 28/29 July 2008.

Yours Sincerely



Alan Aburn, and  
On behalf of my Daughter-in-Law [REDACTED] and  
Granddaughter [REDACTED]

Attachments:

1. Statutory Declaration by Peter Robert Hedger dated 21 January 2008
2. Statutory Declaration by Peter James Maughan Fleming dated 30 January 2008
3. Copy of Email sent from Brisbane Department Veterans Affairs dated 8 October 2007
4. Statutory Declaration by James John Robertson dated 14 February 2008
5. Folder containing correspondence and other documentation relevant to my statements  
(Not included with Email, to be forwarded under separate mailing)