



Submission 96

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

Name: L. T. Lawler

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My name is Lester Thomas Lawler A322104; I have been a member of the F111 Deseal/reseal support group for several years.

I enlisted in 1977 and retired from the Air Force as a Motor Transport Fitter in 1997. I had two postings to Amberley, from 1983 to 1988 and again 1993 to 1997.

During the first posting there I had the misfortune of being delegated to assist in carrying out the task of reclad ding the RAG HANGER as it was called, this hanger was used to carry out the Deseal/Reseal program on F111 fuel tanks.

It was an aluminium frame clad all over with canvas that became saturated with the chemical, SR51, used in the cleaning of the tanks.

When it rained the top of the hanger between the frameworks would catch the water turning it into multiple dams. The way to get rid of the water was to raise someone up in a basket on a forklift and puncture the tarp in the middle of the dam; this would release the water in one large gush drenching the two people in the basket and the forklift driver. This exercise had to be carried out many times as there were many compartments in the roof.

When all the canvas was off, repairs had to be carried out on the frame which was covered with a white powdery substance, after repairs the fire vehicles were called in to wash the framework before new canvas could to be fitted. The time I helped carry out with this operation, it was my job to drive the forklift assist with the removal/replacement of the canvas, assist with frame repairs and load all the old canvas into a dump truck and take it to the contaminated waste dump at Ipswich.

We were not told what was in the chemicals or how dangerous it was. We were only supplied with the basic protection, disposable overalls, dust masks, gloves and (I think) boots. We were not allowed in to the mess for meals due to the smell of the chemicals and shunned when we went anywhere after stand down. I showered at work before going home to my wife and two daughters who complained about the smell, and although I showered again before going to bed, I still smelt and had to shower through the night. In the morning the bedroom smelt and the sheets and pillowcases would have a yellowy stain, requiring washing in the family washing machine daily.

Since then, although it was much later, I started having medical problems, Sleep Disorders, Depression, Anger problems, Prostate Cancer (leaving me totally Incontinent and Impotent), Heart problems (Rapid Atrial Fibrillation) Coeliac Disease, Diabetes, Knee problems, Elbow problems, Degeneration of the Spine, Macular Degeneration, Arthritis and Memory loss. I realise we were told to do this job and we didn't refuse but I dearly wish I had now. I attended all the medical appointments arranged by Deseal/Reseal, however of all the claims I put in, none were accepted as a result of the chemicals as I was never in the tanks.

After discharge from the RAAF I had a job driving a bus for a Respite Centre but it became too hard with my ailments to carry on and I had to quit.

I remain

Les Lawler