



Submission 80

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

Name:

Name withheld

MY SUBMISSION

THIS SUBMISSION CONTAINS CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION.

My name is [REDACTED] and I'm a member of the **F111 Deseal/reseal Support group** in Ipswich and **this is my story**. Without the help and support from this group I don't believe I would have been able to deal with this situation.

I joined the Air Force On the 14th of August, 1990. In my first three months I was posted to Edinburgh RAAF Base South Australia to undergo initial training. My first official posting was to RAAF Base Pearce Western Australia where I spent the next two years as a Transport driver. The tasks I under took were various including VIP driving, long distance, exercise support, store runs, married quarter bus runs, duty driver and Aircraft refuelling duties.

Because the mastering was being disbanded I was sent a letter giving me three areas I could remaster to. I was informed by my SNCO that these mastering would be disbanded at a later stage also and he suggested I look at other areas. At the same time they were calling for interested members to remaster to aircraft mechanics, so I applied. Three months later I received a message informing me I was to undergo aircraft Mechanical training at RAAF Base WAGGA WAGGA New South Wales for six months. After successfully completing my aircraft mechanical training I was posted to RAAF base AMBERLEY Queensland.

On arrival at RAAF base AMBERLEY mid May 1993 I was sent to work at the deseal/reseal aircraft hangar to help the section members there with a backlog of jobs to be done. It was only to be a short term thing but I ended up being there close to two years. In the time that I was employed at the deseal/reseal section I performed fuselage and wing integral fuel tank leak repairs and cockpit pressurisation repairs. I was in the section for three months before I was put on a confined space entry course which was more like a brief than a course. No certificate was issued and it was run by one of the SNCO's from the deseal/reseal section.

Because I was not officially posted into the section I did not receive any blood testing every three months as required to be done for the permanent members in the section. I complained to my SNCO's about the dangers I could see in the section and I was promptly told I didn't know what I was talking about having not long been out of training, and that no one had died from working in the F-111 Aircraft tanks.

While working in the section I suffered from severe headaches, skin rashes, upset stomach, watery eyes, severe diarrhoea, Gastro reflux, mood swings, memory loss, interrupted sleep, fatigue, chronic naval infections, breathing difficulties, Straining of my sheets to a yellow colour from my body sweating during the night and being told that I stunk of chemicals and fuel when going to mess for lunch.

One of the last things I did at the section was to deseal/reseal a set of F-111 wings. One of the things I remember with this was using SR51 primer before sealing the wings with the sealant. In the first inquiry they said it was never used in this time period. That was incorrect as a quantity was found in a depot from one of the southern bases that took over a week to arrive delaying the finishing of the wings.

I was then moved back to R5 servicing at 410 hangar 501 wing. R5 servicing is where the aircraft have a major strip down to repair areas after flying for 400 hours. Part of this servicing is to do deseal/reseal repairs and to remove plumbing from the tanks to allow other trades to do their work. Because I had come from deseal/reseal section I was again given the task to work with deseal/reseal personnel in the repair of these fuel tanks.

After completing my time at R5 servicing I was posted to one squadron. And again while there I was used to get into numerous aircraft fuel tanks for a variety of different tasks. At the same time I was undergoing Flight line training which kept you out on the flight line most of the day doing before flight, after flight servicing, launches, recoveries, launch assists, and minor aircraft maintenance. Working on the flight line all day meant you were being exposed to toxic fumes while aircraft were been launched, recovered after flights taxied around the carports and during sustain maintenance tasks.

All the while my health was continuing to get worse and I was starting to suffer from periods of depression as well as kidney stones from not being allowed to have a water bottle with me on the flight line. Another squadron rule I had to follow, as we were told that water bottles could become a FOD hazard and we were made to feel that the aircraft was more important than your own health.

I had seen numerous RAAF Doctors while at deseal/reseal and for the remaining of my RAAF career. I was informed that the Symptoms I was suffering from were not a problem to be concerned about and that they would fix themselves or they would blow then off until they became so bad that something had to be done. I was given packets of panadol to take for the headaches and cream to use for the rashes which had no effect.

After so much frustration trying to get answers for my continual health decline, I made the chose to have a break from what I believed was causing the problems (organic fuel and chemical exposure). In March 1999 I successfully completed a Camm Data Controller Course that allowed me to work in maintenance control section where I inputted aircraft data into the Camm computer system for three years working in an office. I did this to give my body a break from the chemicals and fuel that I had been exposed to in my job as an aircraft technician, as the RAAF doctors said that there was nothing wrong. This put me at the bottom of the promotion list as your annual comments always went down every time you changed sections.

While I was employed in this section my health didn't get any better but it gave me more time to see medical specialists about some of the conditions that I was suffering from. One of the specialists that I asked to see told me that the rashes I was suffering from was caused from the aviation fuel. Finally one of the RAAF doctors after getting the report put in my medical file that I was never to entry fuel tanks again, although this didn't stop my SNCO's trying to force me to get into the fuel tanks. SNCO's always had trouble finding technicians who could get into the fuel tanks so if you had done it before you ended up having to do the jobs on regular basics.

Six months before finishing my time in Maintenance Control Section they wanted me to go back to Airframe section and I felt that I had no chose but to change from being an Airframe technician to an Ordinance technician so as to

avoid coming in contact with aviation fuel as much as I did as an Airframe technician. This was because I no longer wanted to suffer from skin rashes that the specialist had told me were caused by the fuel exposure. I kept telling the medical doctor that I believed a lot of my health problems were caused by fuel and chemicals exposure and they refused to take any action.

Both medical and environmental health sections told us that the correct testing had been done when issues were raised and that our health was never affected by the chemicals and fuel fumes we worked around on daily bases.

I was to stay at one squadron until early December 2006 and while there I travelled extensively with the squadron both in Australia and overseas on numerous deployments. Because we were always undermanned in the section and lacking in experienced personnel, there was very few deployment that I wasn't on. These deployments lasted between one week and six weeks' duration at a time and sometimes there was only two weeks between each deployment before having to ramp up for the next one which meant we were unable to take leave until later in the year. On these deployments we would work 12 hour days minimum and seven days a week if needed until returning back to base.

By this stage my health had now become a real concern with major depression not responding well to medication, and my body in a lot of pain from the repetitive workload that I did in my job as an ordnance technician. In August 2006 I underwent the first of six operations that now were required because of the lack of proper medical treatment previously, even when being told by surgeons and specialists that the operations were needed to fix the problems.

I was posted to 6 squadron in Mid December 2006 where I went to work in an ordnance workshop and this is where the Aircraft pylons, bomb carriage units, external fuel tanks and CATM missiles were stored, serviced and repaired. Also MAU-12's (internal part of the pylon) were stripped down for repair, exposing members in the section to cadmium dust. The blowing system that they should use while stripping the MAU-12 down was unserviceable while I was at the section.

For the last five years or more I had been telling the RAAF doctors I was suffering from fatigue of the body and they kept telling me the cause was

depression that I was suffering from. It then became so bad that I very nearly crashed my vehicle on my drive home from work and when I did manage to arrive home, I would collapse on the floor and sleep for hours only to wake up later in the night and crawl into bed. It continued to get worse and I could not get to work on time even with three alarm clocks and my mobile phone set beside my bed. My specialist put me on half days to see if this would improve the situation but it didn't improve. The specialist then wrote to the RAAF informing them that I would be unable to come back to work and to start medical discharge.

Medical discharge was instigated on the 12th of July, 2007 and finalized on the 27th of March, 2008. I was told by the medical doctor On Base to organize my own doctors to continue with treatment. For years before my medical discharge I tried to get tested for toxic exposure but the Air Force refused to do it. In July 2007 I was referred to an environmental GP who tests and treats patients who suffer from chronic fatigue. My test results showed that I had high levels of benzene, cadmium, ketones, toluene, xylene, and hydrocarbons in my system that was causing chronic fatigue. As I was still part of the RAAF, but on full time medical leave, I informed the medical doctor treating me on base and he strongly refused to put that information on my medical file until about a month later.

As of 30 June 2008 I'm still on an invalid pension waiting for a decision on what level of pension I will be paid from the Department of Defence. My conditions haven't changed since my medical discharge and I still require treatment for these conditions. The invalid pension doesn't even come close to paying for the cost of these treatments while I'm waiting for compensation for some of the conditions. I went from earning close to sixty thousand to only nineteen thousand and will soon have to sell my house as I don't have enough money for mortgage repayments while waiting for a medical pension.

My replies to the terms of reference:

As I was still part of the Air Force the differences, and transitional arrangements, between the interim health scheme and the final Health Care scheme didn't really affect me until now. While I was still serving, the Air Force paid all the medical expenses but refused to do the range of health benefits provided under the Health Care scheme and I was not entitled to access these treatments as a serving member of the defence force. I cannot comment on whether the Health Care scheme is consistent with the range of treatment and health benefits available to persons under other Health Care schemes as I have never been informed of what is available from other Health Care schemes. The timing of cessation of access to the Health Care scheme is an absolute joke, there is a huge difference in age of the people who were involved in the reseal/deseal debacle. Our health has been affected in so many ways and will continue to deteriorate and cause further health problems as the mixture of dangerously toxic chemicals that we were all exposed to doing our jobs will affect us for the rest of our lives. The only just response in dealing with the health of the men and women affected is to issue **DVA gold cards** to all concerned and stop the ongoing delaying tactics employed by the previous **government** and **politicians** and the **DVA department**. Pay the rightful compensation without delay or have the **blood of the dead and dying** RAAF and EX-RAAF personal on your hands.

My only son was conceived when I was in the middle of working at deseal/reseal and he was born with **Down's syndrome** which was not in either family going back previous generations. He is also been a **type one diabetic** since the age of eight, he has just turned fourteen. The chemicals that I have been exposed to are known to cause **DNA damage** to the **mitochondrial membrane** of human cells and also to the **neurological pathways of the brain**.

This leads me into asking about the study of **mitochondrial study** undertaken by the **Air Force** and the **University of Newcastle** and why the results had not been released yet. I heard that the government stopped the results from being published when the **University of Newcastle** found a link between **damage to mitochondrial membrane and the chemicals that were used in the reseal/deseal program**. I wanted to be part of this study but was told because I was still a servicing member of the RAAF I was not allowed to participate in it. So I tracked down a company that could do this and had my own blood, blood

plasma and urine tested for heavy metal and toxic damage to my cells. This cost me close to a thousand dollars and took four months to get the results back as it had to be sent to **America** to be analysed. **Release the results and let the truth be known.**

The tests that we all had to do for the SHOAMP report were an absolute waste of time and a cover-up by DVA and the specialists they employed to carry out the testing. These tests were more about trying to catch you out so they could deny compensation claims. If I was paying to see these specialists I would want my money back as I have seen so many since I joined the RAAF I know when they are not being truthful. I worked on multimillion dollar aircraft, who the hell they thought they were fooling.

What a cock-up the Ex Gratia scheme turned out to be. I sent my information in not long after the announcement as I do not trust the government while others delayed sending them in, hoping for a larger sum. There are still a lot of people that have missed out on the payment who worked in the tanks beside me and others that had no entitlement to any payment but received ten thousand dollars. I was disgusted only to receive 40,000 dollars for the pain and suffering and continual health problems, I will suffer from for the rest of my life. Also explain to me how one of my ex work mates received close to four hundred thousand dollars for a shoulder injury sustained while in civilian employment and that was for just one injury. Or the Australian female politician who went to a cocktail party as part of her work and fell down a flight of stairs in an intoxicated state, and was also awarded close to the same amount of taxpayers' money that my ex work mate received. I have received a lot more injuries than these two and will receive substantially less, so how can you say that the compensation the government have offered is appropriate. IF this amount of money is to make up for the blatant fuckup and continuing denial, you can stick it fair up your backside and bloody well give me my health back. Because no amount of money would compensate me for what I have and will have to endure for the remainder of my life.

Please explain to me how there can be such a difference between the military and the Queensland workers compensation board payments for the same condition. I received thirty thousand dollars and a workmate received hundred

thousand dollars for depression, when we were both suffering the same condition, and being treated with the same level and type of medication.

Also explain why a public servant dealing with my case and reviewing the non economic loss statement. Which is the final bit of paperwork I send in before being sent an offer from military compensation? Can then send a reply of compensation offer to me stating that he doesn't believe I am that bad and that he would only offer **10%** compensation for the condition. My psychologist had been treating me for five years and he is the one that told me at what level I was at and what to write on the non economic loss statement. How can a public servant override what a clinical psychologist with over 15 years experience had assessed me at being.

Now let's look at the SHOAMP and whether the lump sums available were appropriate. **Firstly** because the proper testing for toxic chemical exposure was never done right, the findings from the SHOAMP are false. **Secondly** the comparison group used were other RAAF aircraft technicians who worked around different aircraft, meaning there would be similar findings and not to bigger gaps between the highlighted problems. The only way to do a proper comparison would have been to find a civilian group that had never worked on aircraft or service in the military. **Thirdly** how can you gather health information from a group that have a large age difference and nearly half are not even at the age or suffering health effects from toxic chemical exposure yet as it takes years to manifest itself but will when they reach mid thirty and on. I'm now suffering more severely from conditions of reseal/deseal in the past couple of years than I was when the SHOAMP statements were required and testing done and this will be the same for the younger guys also affected.

My first lot of compensation claims were submitted not long after the first inquiry, with the help from an Ex-service Advocate working out of Ipswich RSL office. I received a reply saying that they had received then but nothing more. The Advocate helping me became very ill and was not able help me and no one else in the office wanted to take on the Advocates work.

In the mean time an Air force Advocate office was set up at RAAF Base Amberley to help deseal/reseal workers submit their compensation claims. I decided to see then to find out how my claims were going and when they rang

DVA they were told that I hadn't submitted any (**untrue**). They then took on my case and resubmitted the claim paperwork and a copy of my medical file with it (**two full volumes**). About six months later I called in to see how the claims were going and again they made a phone call to DVA to be told that they couldn't find them or that they had been lost and could I resubmit then again.

This was again done by the Air force Advocate office at RAAF Base Amberley and sent in. Some months had passed so I inquired about my claims again as I had found out through others that had submitted claims after me, already had their replies. Again the Advocates office rang DVA to be told by then that because I was still a servicing member my claims had been put to the bottom of the pile. When I did receive a reply from DVA all Deseal/reseal claims were denied and this was the same time most of the others found out too.

I can no longer deal with **DVA** or **MRCA** direct because of the absolute bullshit, little childish games, lack of ability with written communication and delaying tactics that both of these departments continue to employ. **DVA** have refused to accept any Deseal/reseal conditions even though I come under their scheme as well as **MRCA**. I now employ a solicitor to sue **MRCA** for damages caused by my Defence career because this is what you are forced to do, to achieve any compensation outcome. Want to know how to fix these problems; **1:** Fix the absolute lack of cross agency communication and cooperation between the departments. **2:** Stop changing the compensation scheme. Have one scheme only that will be fair for all veterans regardless of their joining date. **3:** Sack all public servants that don't have any previous Defence service that work in these departments and replace them with ex service personal who understand how you are injured performing your duties in the Defence. **4:** If a claim is accepted in one State then it should be accepted in all States of Australia. This is certainly not the case as I have mates in other States that have the same conditions as I do and some of their claims are accepted and mine aren't and vice averse.

Being involved in the deseal/reseal program cost me my marriage, my health, my long-term plans, loss of close friends, loss of earning capability, my Air force job, social life, my sporting and dancing abilities. I was a super fit 27 year old when I joined the air force with no health problems but that certainly

change when I became part of the deseal/reseal program. I certainly didn't join to become sick from doing my job, especially having a free medical/dental system there that would monitor and fix health problems that arose. But unfortunately the medical system in the air force has failed to diagnose and treat aircraft technicians suffering from organic solvent exposure.

All Air Force personnel undergo annual medical testing with aircraft technicians having to have further blood taken to check for heavy metal and chemical exposure. When I asked the senior nurse who took the blood samples if these were the correct blood tests, she admitted that they weren't and that was what the doctors wanted done. The extra blood test was a normal liver function test, and this won't show heavy metal or chemical exposure and the Air Force and the medical doctors know this.

I still have a lot of mates in the Air Force who are posted to 6 Squadron RAAF Base Amberley. They were given a brief from the medical and environmental sections just over a week ago and this is what they were told. The senior medical officer admitted that they had been doing the wrong blood tests required for heavy metal and chemical exposure. Then the environmental officer told the group that there was no danger from working around military aviation fuel. When asked about the percentage of chemical additives in the fuel, he told them he was waiting for information to be sent from Shell and this could take up to three weeks for a reply. The strange thing is it only took me 30 seconds on the Internet to find this information. This is just another case of this dishonest and incompetent Defence organisation trying to cover up their mistakes.

When I was at my lowest point with depression I was told by one of the medical doctors on base, to stop bludging on my mates and go back to work. This is the way they get you to go back to work even when you're sick by making you feel guilty that you are letting your mates down. I could write so much more but I will finish at this point and say this is only a small fraction of what went on and how I have been treated. The next stage is to tell my full story to the media which I will do because after seven years of false promises and lies I truly believe nothing will come of this inquiry.

When I wrote my statement for the first inquiry, it was changed by the government solicitors and when I asked them about this, they said if I wanted to get any compensation, then I had to sign the changed statement. It was a nothing like what I had written and they had destroyed the original statement without my permission. I wasn't happy about what had happened and I felt pressured and bullied by the solicitors into signing the document. **Under no circumstances will this statement be changed by anyone else except the original writer or legal action will be taken.**

[REDACTED]