



**T**here's an undeniably glamorous side to fighter jets that has to do with the dashing deeds of Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*: the very stuff of schoolboy dreams. But for many of the thousands of Royal Australian Air Force personnel deployed to maintain the fuel tanks of the iconic F-111 strike bombers, it's a very different tale. Life has unravelled into a grotesque nightmare.

As many as 2,000 servicemen and civilian contractors involved in an F-111 cleaning program known as deseal/reseal between the years 1973 and 2000 may have been exposed to toxic chemicals during the course of that maintenance work and subsequently developed debilitating illnesses.

Deseal/reseal was a program the RAAF used to fix leaking F-111 fuel tanks and keep these two dozen strategically important long-range bombers in service. The process required maintenance personnel climbing inside the labyrinth of fuel tanks on an F-111 to apply a potent cocktail of chemicals and solvents to remove old and damaged sealant before new sealant was applied to the wall of the fuel tanks.

In 2001, an air force board of inquiry revealed the extent of unsafe work practices in its four F-111 deseal/reseal programs. As a result, Defence made provision for private healthcare for those affected by the deseal/reseal programs. A Study of Health Outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP) was also commissioned.

The release of that study prompted the then government to improve access to healthcare schemes and announce an ex-gratia payment to those who had worked on the deseal/reseal programs.

Significantly, the quantum of the ex-gratia payments—\$10,000 or \$40,000—was determined not by the degree of suffering caused by chemical exposure, but by the length of service on the deseal/reseal programs. The government stressed that the initiative was not a health-related compensation package at all, but purely an acknowledgement that personnel “experienced an onerous and unique working environment”.

Seven years after SHOAMP was commissioned, federal parliament's Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade is revisiting this question with an inquiry into the compensation issues surrounding maintenance personnel, and their families, affected by the toxic chemicals used in the deseal/reseal cleaning process.

The inquiry, which was launched in May, is being conducted by the Defence Sub-Committee, and delivers on an election commitment made last year by Alan Griffin (Member for Bruce, Vic), now the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. It has investigated and reviewed claims for compensation by those affected. It has been investigating whether the response by the previous government to SHOAMP was adequate and

# AFTER BURN

**The devastating repercussions of an F-111 cleaning program are still being felt.**

**STORY: JAMES NICHOLSON**

consistent with the study's findings. The terms of reference also include investigation into the administration of the ex-gratia payments.

In the words of Defence Sub-Committee chair Arch Bevis (Member for Brisbane, Qld), the inquiry is seeking “to arrive at a fair and decent outcome for all those affected, and hopefully make some recommendations to that effect”.

Among the 90 submissions made to the inquiry are a litany of personal accounts from former deseal/reseal engineers and their spouses, chronicling in some detail the horrific health problems suffered by those who had worked on the programs. They include skin rashes, neurological conditions, asthma, liver disease, erectile dysfunction, a range of mental disorders, liver disease and cancer.

“At 51 I am no longer fit, I have had two strokes and a massive seizure,” wrote one former engineer. Another told



of “constant joint pain, nightmares and headaches, which I hope my head will explode and get it over with”.

The wife of another wrote: “His life is truly dismal as he is on medication all the time. It is so sad to see the healthy, proud, wonderful man that I married in this dreadful state, unable to take control of even simple day to day living.”

The submissions also give a grim insight into atrocious workplace conditions endured by the “goop troop” as they were called. Paul McCulloch, who served in the RAAF from 1980 to 1989, was 19 when he was posted to deseal/reseal.

“I witnessed my work colleagues being dragged unconscious from the fuel tanks,” he told the inquiry. “We used chemicals to clean sealant from our skin and usually went into tanks with very little protection. When you arrived at DSRS you pretty much took the existing culture as the

### **“I witnessed my work colleagues being dragged unconscious from the fuel tanks.”**

norm. The only protection you were asked to wear was cover-alls, which were really designed to keep your clothes clean. As they were made of cotton, they would absorb fuel residue and other chemicals so it was not uncommon for you to be ‘wet’ with chemicals.”

Another submission described having to “swim in chemicals” and noted: “All the time we had no breathing equipment and the smell of fuel and chemicals etc would be up your nose to the point that you would get a headache and have to get out of the tank to let your head clear.”

Significantly, however, judging by the evidence given by deputy chief of the air force, Air Vice Marshall Geoff Brown at the first public hearing in Canberra, this is not an issue from which the RAAF is prepared to shrink.

The RAAF had, said Air Vice Marshall Brown with spectacular candour, breached its duty of care.

“We are here because the air force hurt a large number of our people involved in F-111 fuel maintenance between 1973 and 2000,” he told the inquiry.

“We’re grateful for this chance to look at what has been done to them and we believe that more could and should

be done. Our main concern is to do everything we can to ensure anyone who has been hurt by their involvement in F-111 fuel tank maintenance is properly looked after.”

At the core of the inquiry is the fact that appropriate compensation to those who have suffered as a result of chemical exposure during the deseal/reseal programs has still not been paid. The inquiry heard that the issue of chemical exposure extends well beyond those who undertook the maintenance and cleaning work. Ancillary workers and others who were indirectly involved in the programs were also affected. This group included, for example, personnel delivering the drums of chemicals, fitters, air base photographers and the spouses of maintenance engineers, who would wash sodden overalls dripping in chemicals.

The issue is further clouded by the fact that there is no robust record to determine which personnel required health treatment as a result of their involvement, whether direct or indirect, in F-111 fuel tank maintenance.

“This is not a simple issue,” Air Vice Marshall Brown conceded. “There are many variables. There are some things we know from the health study but in other areas the science is far from certain ... achieving a fair outcome for everyone will not be easy. However, we remain committed to doing everything that we can to help everyone who has been affected and to assist the inquiry in looking at all options.”

Notwithstanding the complexities confronting the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) in their task of assessing eligibility for the ex-gratia payments and managing claims for healthcare assistance, the overall handling and administration of that process was the subject of some pointed criticism by the Commonwealth Ombudsman in its submission to the inquiry.

The Ombudsman had investigated 102 complaints made by people who had unsuccessfully sought access to the ex-gratia payment scheme. Investigation of those complaints turned up some notable bureaucratic inadequacies.

“DVA did not always regularly update claimants on the progress of the scheme,” the Ombudsman told the inquiry. “Records of conversation were not evident on file ... The identity of the author of handwritten comments on file documents was not apparent ... Poor record keeping also made it more difficult for the Ombudsman’s office to investigate complaints ... DVA did not have a written policy document for assessing and determining claims apart from their tier definitions.”

The Ombudsman found that RAAF and departmental records were insufficient to sustain a claim or did not fully reflect on individuals’ service. There were also procedural and resourcing shortcomings.



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**SPEAKING UP:** *Gerard Murray, an RAAF warrant officer (left) and Ian Fraser, president of the F-111 deseal/reseal support group (above) giving evidence at a hearing in Brisbane.*

*Photos: Andrew Dawson*

The deficiencies identified by the Ombudsman certainly resonated with the Defence Sub-Committee.

“I cannot recall in 12 years where I have read such a damning commentary on the administration of a benefits program established by government,” said Senator for Western Australia Mark Bishop.

Another key area of interest for the Defence Sub-Committee was the inconsistencies and contradictions apparent in parameters and processes used to determine the type of treatment and benefit to which individuals were entitled.

Among those apparent contradictions was the government’s decision to use exposure rather than health impacts as its yardstick by which to define eligibility of the higher ex-gratia payment—or indeed of any payment at all.

As Stuart Robert (Member for Fadden, Qld) put it: “Someone who received a \$40,000 ex-gratia payment may be fit as a fiddle, whereas someone who received \$10,000 or nothing may have debilitating impacts on their health.”

Moreover, within a week of the initial board of inquiry recommending that healthcare should be provided to all personnel who may have been exposed to chemicals during deseal/reseal, it emerged that SHOAMP would target only those who had taken part in the four formal deseal/reseal programs. The same parameters were set for ex-gratia payments.

Laurence Carpenter, who had been deemed ineligible for an ex-gratia payment, illustrated the problem in his

submission: “I did not qualify for a lump sum ... because we were not officially on the F-111 deseal/reseal program, even though we worked in the same F-111 fuel tanks and were exposed to the same chemicals and fumes.”

He added: “I estimated that my fuel tank occupancy was well in excess of the qualifying time period for the ex-gratia time period.”

Acting Secretary of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Ed Killesteyn, acknowledged that the lines setting out definitions of eligibility may not have been drawn in exactly the right places.

“There are a number of choices that are open, at least in terms of the recommendations that can be made about where that line is drawn,” he said.

Mr Killesteyn went on to urge the Defence Sub-Committee to ensure that those who needed healthcare treatment had access to it.

Indeed, there was a palpable shared sense of genuine desire among the witnesses and those who made written submissions to ensure that anyone with a legitimate entitlement received appropriate compensation for the heinous legacy of those F-111 fuel tanks.

The Defence Sub-Committee’s report is due in October. •

For more information on the Defence Sub-Committee’s inquiry visit [www.aph.gov.au/jfadt](http://www.aph.gov.au/jfadt) or email [jscfadt@aph.gov.au](mailto:jscfadt@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 2313.