

# Help is at hand: AM

**By JULIE BRUMFIELD-JONES**

**SERVICEMEN** and civilians involved in the deseal and reseal of F-111s often worked in shorts and t-shirts while handling toxic chemicals, a sometimes-heated Ipswich public meeting heard last night.

An independent board of inquiry will commence full hearings on the program from March 19 and is expected to sit for up to six weeks.

RAAF chief air marshal Errol McCormack said he was shocked to hear the previously-unheard stories of former workers.

"I was concerned that those things happened and that's what the board of inquiry is all about, is to bring out all the pro-

cesses that were used and to allow people like that to actually give their story," AM McCormack said.

He said his prime concern was the health of "his people" both past and present and he wanted them to know help was available.

About 200 people attended last night's public forum which outlined the RAAF's plan to address health concerns about the deseal/reseal programs.

One man at the Ipswich Civic Centre meeting told the meeting he had been involved in disposing of the toxin SR51, which was used to soften old seals, while dressed in a t-shirt and shorts.

A woman employed as a civilian contractor on the program

said she had worn disposable overalls and booties over her clothes and a charcoal mask.

The workers said they wore what they were told to.

Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA) spokesman Dr Keith Horsley said tenders had been called for the health study which would involve a questionnaire, tests and a detailed medical and psychological examination.

He said the DVA would be contacting all program workers, whether they were in Australia or overseas.

Dr Horsley said the DVA would appreciate help from the workers to find their colleagues.

Enquiries to the DVA hotline on 1800 502 302.

# Papers reveal RAAF concern

By STEVE GRAY

THE RAAF struggled with health concerns over toxic chemicals used in F-111 maintenance for over 20 years, documents reveal.

The highly toxic chemical SR51 has been used since 1978 to deseal fuel tanks in the aircraft.

Documents obtained by *The Queensland Times* show the use and disposal of the chemical caused problems for the RAAF from its introduction.

Evidence already before the Board of In-

quiry into the deseal/reseal process suggests problems continued until last year.

At first the RAAF knew little about the toxicity of a chemical personnel were using inside the F-111s' fuel tanks.

On September 26, 1978 Group Captain Ackland, RAAF Base Amberley's commanding officer, requested information about the disposal of "offensive, hazardous and toxic wastes".

"Currently a number of methods are adopted, some of which have an ecological impact, including burning, dumping and

unauthorised disposal in sewerage or stormwater drainage," Gp Capt Ackland's letter said.

Notes of a meeting held at No. 3 Aircraft Depot, Amberley, on March 8, 1979 said: "No information about Thiophenol (a constituent chemical) is available, other than the fact of its toxicity in high concentrations".

A health risk assessment of SR51, dated March 1979, said: "44 gallon drums of SR51 are stood on their sides in the open on raised racks and some leakage

has occurred.

"Under certain conditions the SR51 vapours accumulate in nearby hangars where personnel have complained of nausea."

SR51 waste was stored in drums or tanks and then disposed of via a furnace, while the sludge left in drums "will be buried".

A telex message of December 1983 stated "several drums (of sealant) are leaking and many more are suspect because of the amount of rust and deterioration . . . a potentially serious health, safety and environmental risk."

# Outcry over RAAF chemicals

By **BRIAN BENNION**

FURTHER allegations of radioactive and toxic chemicals leaching into waterways around RAAF Base Amberley have prompted calls for a separate inquiry into environmental mismanagement.

Ex-servicemen, Queensland Greens and a local government anti-nuclear lobby group yesterday called for a dedicated inquiry following revelations in *The Queensland Times* yesterday.

According to leaked documents, the chemical SR-51, used

in F-111 fuel tank maintenance, was pumped into Warrill Creek adjacent to the RAAF base.

An ex-serviceman who asked not to be named claimed other toxic cleaning agents were used until recent years.

He said Gamlon, used to clean aircraft engines and vehicles and Ardrox, used to strip electrical and computerised equipment residue, would have leached into nearby waterways.

Allegations of radioactive leaching during the washdown of Amberley-based Lincoln bombers which flew through

atomic clouds from the Maralinga nuclear tests during the 1950s also re-surfaced yesterday.

Communities Against Radioactive Dumps and Queensland Greens spokeswoman Desiree Mahoney said she was not surprised by the recent allegations, describing the base's policy on disposal of toxic waste as being "out of sight, out of mind".

Australian Local Government Nuclear Free Zones and Toxic Industries Secretariat deputy convenor Paul Tully called for a Royal Commission.

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# RAAF chemicals seep through safety gear

CHEMICALS used to maintain F-111 aircraft had permeated protective clothing worn by RAAF personnel, a doctor told an inquiry in Brisbane yesterday.

Giving evidence at the F-111 deseal/reseal Board of Inquiry, retired RAAF Amberley doctor, Group Captain Paul Shumack, said he had first learned of health complaints linked to the maintenance process in late November 1999.

He said a RAAF maintenance crew worker had complained to him of memory loss and other problems which the crew member put down to

working with chemicals for long periods inside the aircraft's fuel tanks.

Dr Shumack said he did not initially report the patient's concerns as he did not wish to create hysteria at RAAF Base Amberley.

But in early January last year, two more maintenance crew members brought similar complaints to him and he began his own informal investigation.

Later in the month he sought advice from the base's environmental health officer, who had also been researching protective equipment and

found the chemical Toluene could permeate overalls used by maintenance crew.

Dr Shumack said it was then that he alerted the officer in charge of 501 Wing to his concerns and the spray seal process was shut down.

Meanwhile, Ian Fraser, one of more than 700 veterans involved in the maintenance procedure said it was important veterans were present while evidence was given.

"They can pick up errors in evidence and have them corrected," Mr Fraser said.

More than 850 people are potential witnesses.



# Defence merger demotes health

THE merging of Australia's defence services and an increase in peacekeeping operations had led to a decline in focus on occupational health and safety, an inquiry was told yesterday.

Retired Air Commodore Warren Harrex told a defence force inquiry in Brisbane that the emphasis on occupational medicine had fallen since 1993, when the RAAF, Army and Navy merged.

Dr Harrex said RAAF health services had since been cut back and priority was given to getting aircrew ready for operations in places such as Africa and the Persian Gulf.

"When I left (in 1998) I had concerns about the future of health care in the air force,"

Dr Harrex said.

The health assessment and monitoring of non-aircrew, such as maintenance staff, was third priority, behind aircrew and the treatment of injury and disease, he said.

"Non-urgent things would drop off the priority list," he said.

The inquiry has heard concerns from former RAAF personnel working on the F-111 "deseal/reseal" fuel tank process that a lack of focus on occupational health may have contributed to health problems — which they blame on exposure to toxic chemicals — not being picked up earlier.

The former acting director of Air Force Medicine, Michael

Dugdale, told the inquiry yesterday he had signed a memo in 1992 authorising the deseal/reseal process to go ahead if it met stringent health and safety conditions.

The conditions included that it stuck to the deseal/reseal procedures set out in a United States Air Force report.

These procedures included fully explaining hazards to maintenance workers, contracting an occupational hygienist to assess the process set up — including ventilation and protective equipment — and carrying out air sampling.

Dr Dugdale said he believed the deseal/reseal process had met the conditions set out in his memo.

Friday, March 30, 2001

# 'Goop troops' call for equal rights

FORMER RAAF personnel appearing before the Board of Inquiry into the deseal and re-seal of F-111 aircraft have requested equal legal representation before the inquiry.

RAAF veteran Ian Fraser, of Forest Lake, said although officers and senior NCOs had counsel representation, ordinary tradesmen and women did not.

"It is inappropriate that the ordinary 'goop troops' who were

most affected by the proximity of highly-toxic chemicals do not have counsel representing them while those who gave the orders do," Mr Fraser said.

He said counsel for the workers would be able to ask questions of witnesses which would lead to a greater understanding of the deseal/reseal process.

The Board of Inquiry was told yesterday that medical staff ignored complaints by RAAF

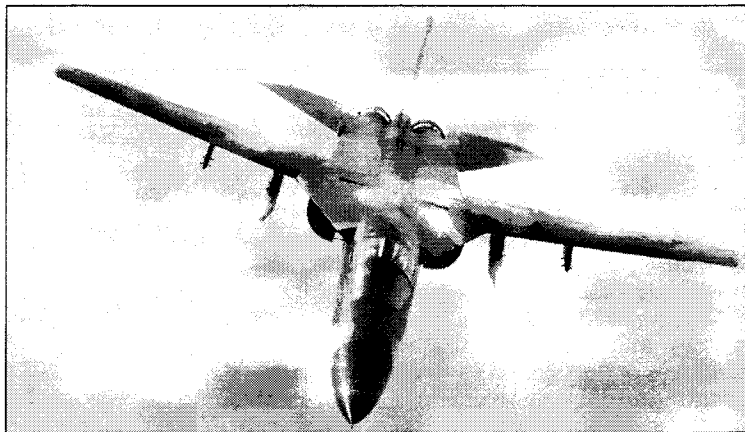
maintenance workers that chemicals were causing dizziness, headaches and memory loss.

Giving evidence at the Defence Force inquiry in Brisbane, RAAF Corporal William McClymont said when he visited a doctor to complain of memory loss, which he thought was related to chemicals he used, he was told not to worry about it.

He said on one occasion he was told by a doctor: "The smoko truck is here. You'll be fine. I'll see you later."

Corp McClymont, who worked on the F-111 spray seal project from 1996 to its suspension in January 2000, said he suffered daily headaches and short-term memory loss.

Retired RAAF sergeant Mark Orwin, who supervised the spray seal program from 1997-99, said senior officers would have known about health problems since late 1998 because of the number of workers he had sent to doctors.



# Call for lost RAAF records

FORMER RAAF maintenance workers hope to recover missing medical documents before a defence force inquiry takes closing submissions.

The F-111 Deseal-Reseal Board of Inquiry, which is examining health and safety issues arising from toxic chemicals used to maintain F-111 aircraft, completed public hearings in Brisbane on Tuesday.

But former maintenance worker Ray Webster said yesterday he believed there were many other documents still that could be relevant to the inquiry, which will receive closing submissions

on May 10.

The inquiry heard that maintenance worker medical files have gone missing, partly due to the merger of the RAAF, Army and Navy and the incompatibility of filing systems.

Mr Webster said he delivered new material on his medical condition and chemicals he used in the deseal-reseal process the day before public hearings wrapped up and knew of others who had yet to find relevant documents.

"I have had several reports from different people who have had up to 16 pages missing from their

(medical) documents," Mr Webster said.

"They are very concerned about these missing documents.

"They have been promised (by defence authorities) that they will be found."

Several other former RAAF workers are also known to be in the process of securing more medical evidence.

Mr Webster said he believed the inquiry report, due in early June, would find there were "a lot of unknowns" in the deseal-reseal projects carried out at the RAAF's largest air base at Amberley.

# F-111 staff fall asleep in fuel tank

A FORMER RAAF maintenance worker yesterday blamed toxic chemicals used to clean F-111 aircraft for a blackout which caused him to crash his car.

Giving evidence at a Defence Force inquiry in Brisbane, ex-warrant officer John Hall said he had experienced several blackouts, including the one in 1980 which caused him to crash.

Mr Hall, who worked in 3 Aircraft Depot during the first "deseal/reseal" program in 1978 and 1979 at RAAF Amberley air base, told the inquiry that chemicals used in the process "seemed to permeate the skin and was impossible to remove".

Now trained as an occupational health and safety expert, Mr Hall said the depot's "culture towards chemicals would now be viewed as ignorant".

He said workers would often fall asleep in the fuel tanks they were repairing because the task was tedious and unpleasant.

Retired depot supervisor Peter Felton told the inquiry the RAAF used the depot — nicknamed "Goop Gul-

ly" by its 28 workers — to discipline individuals who bucked the system and give new recruits their first taste of the job.

Mr Felton, who supervised the "deseal/reseal" operation from 1985-87, said the depot was seen as a "leper colony" by other RAAF personnel and he had personally been sent there for punishment after run-ins with senior officers.

He said the depot adopted cartoon skunk Pepe Le Peu as its mascot because of the stench of chemicals.

Mr Felton said health concerns were taken seriously by senior officers.

"But it was only a topic for a couple of days and then it died down," Mr Felton said.

Retired flight sergeant Des Doherty, who worked in the depot from 1981 to 1983, said protective gloves bubbled and disintegrated, goggles fogged up and chemicals and water penetrated overalls worn by those working inside the fuel tanks.

Despite the problems, he said he had never advocated that the program be stopped to review its safety.

# -F-111 health study under way-

THE Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) has begun work on a comprehensive survey of the health of RAAF veterans who undertook the F-111 reseal/deseal process.

A scientific advisory committee is designing a study of veterans' health and it will soon be let to public tender, said the DVA's division head (compensation and support) Bill Maxwell.

The committee will oversee the health study once it is under way.

Mr Maxwell said the health study was expected to take 12 months and should report by the middle of 2002.

"In the meantime those who have health problems should make compensation claims now," said Mr Maxwell.

"Those claims are not dependent on the health study."

# Call for DVA to screen RAAF vets

THE Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) should assess veterans who handled highly toxic chemicals during F-111 maintenance on their current medical status instead of wasting time ploughing through health records, an RAAF veteran said yesterday.

Ian Fraser, of Forest Lake, was one of about 800 air force personnel assigned to the reseal and deseal of the the F-111 fuel tanks.

The task required crawling inside the fuel tanks, which are integral to the airframe, and stripping out the sealing compound. The tanks were then cleaned back to bare metal and resealed.

Highly toxic chemicals, including SR51, were used during the process.

The RAAF has announced the most comprehensive inquiry ever undertaken by the Australian Defence Force into the effects of the reseal/deseal process on veterans and civilians.

Hearings are due to begin on February 26.

Mr Fraser said the onus of proof in regard to chemical damage to veter-

ans should rest with the DVA, instead of ex-servicemen.

"The current situation is that unless you have an accepted condition, DVA will do nothing for you," Mr Fraser said.

"The requirement is for you to prove your claim and if accepted then DVA will provide assistance.

"However, the DVA should be proactively approaching affected personnel regardless of whether they have submitted a claim or not.

"They should be providing medical treatment and screening programs."

"Forget the historical medical records and look at the current health of affected people and their families because that is where the issues are.

"All the activity and effort being put into this inquiry is of little comfort to those who have lost loved ones, and to those about to lose loved ones."

Mr Fraser said the inquiry was focussing only on those directly involved in the reseal/deseal program.

"It would seem that very little is being done for these innocent victims," Mr Fraser said.

# Tragic lack of concern

I WRITE in reference to the article (QT 19/6) headlined: "Parliament knew about chemical risk".

While reading the report that this story is about, I couldn't help but develop a mental image of a mixture of the *Yes Minister* and *F-Troop* TV shows.

It is however not funny — it's absolutely tragic.

These men, elected officials and military leaders, were more concerned about heritage issues and damage to F-111 components.

Absolutely no concern was shown when it was stated that there was a risk of greater "lethality" with the spray seal program.

I think now that it is appropriate for the Prime Minister to seek answers from the politicians present at this meeting as to why they ignored the health and safety issues presented.

The Chief of Defence and Chief of the Air Force should also be seeking answers from the military leaders present at this meeting.

It is offensive to think that these men of power and influence can just dismiss the health and well being of members of the ADF.

*June 22, 01 — Ian Fraser, Forest Lake.*

# Parliament knew about chemical risk

**By STEVE GRAY**

DESPITE a warning to a parliamentary committee in 1998 about the lethal nature of chemicals used in the deseal and reseal of F-111 fuel tanks, personnel used the chemicals for another 18 months.

In May 1998, the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Public Works — which included three senators — was examining the redevelopment of RAAF Base Amberley.

On May 19, 1998, the committee was told by Officer Commanding 503 Wing, Group Captain Richard Sergeant that the old method of removing the sealant had been replaced by a spray-on sealant.

In evidence to the committee he said, "(it) is a new technique we are using but as a result of

that, while productivity improves, it also brings with it greater lethality and so forth of the spray-on sealant."

The deseal/reseal maintenance procedure was suspended in January, 2000, after RAAF workers complained of health effects caused by the chemicals.

Gp Capt Sargeant's remarks brought no further questioning on the lethal nature of the chemicals from the nine Federal politicians at the hearing.

Earlier that day, the committee was told by Brigadier Garry Kelly, director general of project delivery at Department of Defence, that the deseal/reseal facility was in a Bellman hangar.

"This facility is dysfunctional and suffers from OH&S (Occupational Health and Safety) and

environmental issues," Brig Kelly said.

Australia's latest defence force inquiry subsequently investigated the procedure and will report later this year.

Also, the Department of Veterans' Affairs is undertaking a health survey of up to 700 veterans of the procedure and their children.

RAAF veteran Ian Fraser, of Forest Lake, said he was surprised no action was taken following Gp Capt Sargeant's evidence.

"The lethality was mentioned but not one of the politicians chose to pursue it," Mr Fraser said.

"Obviously the health of the workers was of little importance to them."



# MP slams inaction by the RAAF

By STEVE GRAY

IT was extraordinary that senior RAAF officers took two years to warn of the dangers of the deseal/reseal process on F-111s, despite evidence to a 1998 parliamentary committee, Member for Oxley Bernie Ripoll said yesterday.

Earlier this week, the QT revealed that in May, 1998, Group Captain Richard Sargeant told the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Public Works a new method of resealing the F-111s' fuel tanks "brings with it greater lethality and so forth of the spray-on sealant".

The deseal/reseal process was suspended in January last year after Amberley personnel complained of ill-health.

Mr Ripoll said neither the committee nor the seven senior RAAF officers appearing before it had pursued Gp Capt Sargeant's statement.

"It is extraordinary that it appears to have been another two years before the Chief of Air Force was alerted by RAAF internal investigations to the potential health risk the F-111 maintenance procedure was to

RAAF personnel," Mr Ripoll said.

"While the committee is charged with the responsibility of dealing with public works projects over \$6 million, it should also be able to pick up comments about potential health dangers that may exist in any system.

"More worrying however is if the RAAF needs to make allegations of greater lethality of a new maintenance process then there are many more constructive ways to achieve this, the least being to bring it up at a public works hearing dealing with bricks and mortar.

"Defence Force personnel are no less entitled to have OH & S standards in their workplace than any other Australian worker.

"The use of the term greater lethality indicates that the process was already lethal and should be a matter pursued further."

An RAAF Board of Inquiry into deseal/reseal will report later this year.

A separate Veterans' Affairs department study into the effects will be completed within two years.

# Staff fail health card rules

SERVICE personnel from RAAF Base Amberley's controversial deseal/reseal program looking for faster health care are not eligible for the Veterans Affairs top level gold card pass, the department said yesterday.

The Gold Card allows airmen to free health care if

they have an assessed medical condition and are:

- ☐ veterans of WWI;
- ☐ prisoners of war; and,
- ☐ veterans of WWII, over 70 years of age and have seen actual, or war-like service.

Airmen who claim they have been badly affected by

chemical exposure asked to be given Veterans Affairs gold cards after learning on Monday that a new health inquiry into their symptoms would take two years.

Retired airman Ron Seymour said it was ridiculous for the study to take two years.

# Study delay irks airmen

By **TONY MOORE**

**RAAF Amberley** air personnel are furious after learning yesterday a health study into chemical exposure from the de-seal/re-seal program on F-111s will take a further two years to complete.

A representative group of airmen were briefed on the Veterans Affairs-backed health inquiry into workers' health yesterday at Ipswich Civic Hall.

The two-year time-frame was confirmed by a spokesman for Veterans Affairs Minister Bruce Scott in Canberra yesterday.

The retired servicemen were told Health Services Australia would complete the testing of personnel and staff from New-

castle's Hunter University would assess the results.

They would compare the health results from the personnel working with chemical stripping agents on F-111s with a sample population of service personnel who did not work in the de-seal/re-seal program.

Recommendations after these tests would set out any compensation or assistance to the former de-seal/re-seal teams, known as "goop troops."

After the meeting with airmen yesterday several former "goop troop" workers said the delay was alarming.

Ron Seymour, who incinerated chemical-soaked materials

while working in the goop troops from 1978-79, said the department should simply seek corroboration of the medical records of service personnel.

"We have lost 11 people so far. How many more?" Mr Seymour said.

He said even though about 1000 people had given information or evidence to the recent Board of Inquiry only about 80 people had as yet submitted health claims.

"They are all waiting to see what happens before they lodge claims," he said.

Colleague Peter Felton said the study should be faster, using existing health records.

# RAAF staff need help

By STEVE GRAY

VETERANS of the F-111 deseal/reseal program RAAF Base Amberley need immediate help for their health problems, a member of the consultative forum for a veterans' health study says.

Ian Fraser of Forest Lake, a veteran of the maintenance program, said while he welcomed Veterans' Affairs Department initiatives they were already too late for some and would take too long for others.

Minister for Veterans' Affairs Bruce Scott has called for veterans suffering health problems to apply for compensation.

Chief of the Air Force Air Marshal Angus Houston last week

said the health of veterans was his highest priority and they should approach their local GP.

Mr Fraser said about ten veterans of the program had already died.

He said health assessments could take too long to assist victims and the rules needed to be changed to have compensation paid earlier.

Bona fide veterans of the deseal/reseal program should be treated like veterans wounded in an active theatre of hostilities, where a different burden of proof was required.

"The bureaucracy has no hope of moving at the speed veterans need them to move at," Mr Fraser said on Saturday.

"They probably need to change the rules for this one, the way they assess a veteran's entitlements.

"They're doing the right thing in calling for former goop troops (workers in the program) to come forward, but it is still going to take too long for some people."

A health study into the effects of the reseal/deseal would take up to two years but Mr Scott said veterans need not wait to seek compensation.

The report of an RAAF board of inquiry into the deseal/reseal program has been delivered to AM Houston.

He said he hoped to present it to Mr Scott within weeks.

# Breaking the rules

RE: "Staff fail health card rules" (QT 2/6), let's look at who has failed here and who has broken the rules.

The Air Force has failed on its requirement to provide a safe and healthy work place. The Air Force failed to stop the program when there were problems with monitoring equipment. This equipment was supposed to be used to ensure a safe environment inside the fuel tanks.

The Air Force failed to provide effective safety equipment.

The Air Force failed to provide effective medical screening of the workers before they started in Deseal Reseal, they then failed to provide effective on going medical screening of workers in Deseal Reseal.

The Air Force failed to advise workers in Deseal Reseal when the risks were found to be greater than originally stated by the suppliers of various chemicals.

It's more than clear to anyone who has been following this tragedy through the news that the Air Force has failed and broke the rules.

And now these people who worked in Deseal Reseal have been failed by the system.

If the people who worked in Deseal Reseal fail to meet the requirements for access to decent health care, then maybe it's time to change the rules.

But sadly all that will happen is the bureaucrats will hide behind a wall of red tape.

Who hasn't failed here?

The men and women who worked in Deseal Reseal. Over the past 20 years they have done their job and aircraft returned to service. And now in their time of need they are cast aside while the Air Force and Department of Veterans affairs screw around deciding what to do.

— Ian Fraser, Forest Lake.

# Govt calls on Amberley F-111 vets to join study

THE Government yesterday made a plea for air force personnel and civilians involved in a health scare at RAAF base Amberley to take part in a special study.

Veterans' Affairs Minister Bruce Scott said a health study overseen by an independent scientific advisory committee would follow a board of inquiry into the desealing/resealing of F-111 aircraft at the base.

The board's report, which has yet to be released, is expected to raise serious concerns about the desealing/resealing of F-111 fuel tanks at the base between 1977

and 2000.

The year-long board of inquiry investigated health and safety conditions and the use of toxic chemicals by workers, who said they suffered blackouts, breathing problems and cancer under the conditions they were forced to endure.

Mr Scott said the two-year study of workers on the program would include a thorough medical examination and blood and psychometric testing.

He urged anyone who had been involved in the Amberley scare to contact the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) and

contribute to the study.

"DVA and the board of inquiry have already been approached by a number of individuals who were involved in the maintenance program," Mr Scott said.

"It is possible that some personnel who were involved have not been in contact yet.

"It is important that everyone who has been involved be given the opportunity to take part in the study, to ensure their health concerns are addressed."

People wishing to take part should contact the department on (07) 32238757 by August 31.

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**Ghosts of the past — Page 10**

# RAAF's Ghosts of the past

JULIE BRUMFIELD-JONES  
examines the RAAF's latest battle

**B**irth defects in children conceived or mothered by past and present RAAF workers will be compared against a national database as part of a major health study into chemicals used to seal F-111 fuel tanks.

The RAAF opens its Board of Inquiry (BOI) into its F-111 reseal/deseal program later this month.

The BOI and a Department of Veteran Affairs' (DVA) health study will examine the effects of chemicals used in the reseal and deseal of F-111s, including possible links to increased cancer rates in workers in the program.

BOI spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Patrick Nunan said the board, scheduled to begin full hearings on March 19, would be looking at what occurred and why.

Lt Col Nunan said the board would examine all issues and its final report could be "wide ranging, critical and finger pointing if necessary".

He said 874 people had already contacted the BOI but others had yet to come forward.

Poor employee records were one difficulty facing the BOI.

He said many existing records had come from the identification of people in photographs and the BOI urged others to contact them.

"We are extremely interested in talking to everyone," Lt Col Nunan said.

Chief of the Air Force, Air Marshal Errol McCormack, said the board had been set-up to help people and was not a witch-hunt.

AM McCormack said since becoming aware of the problems last January, his prime concern had been for the health of his people, both past and present.

He said the board, which had his full support, would be open and transparent.

"I wanted an open investigation chaired by an independent judge to bring out all issues," AM McCormack said.

AM McCormack said the full extent of health risks associated with the program would not be known until a health study was completed.

"It is important that anyone with medical concerns seek help.

"The board is tasked to find all issues of occupational health and safety."

DVA spokesman Dr Keith Horsley said the concerns of the workers seemed to have "some ream of substance".

Dr Horsley said the study would be conducted world-wide and the department wanted workers to help them find as many of their colleagues as possible.

The DVA is outsourcing the study, which will be overseen by an independent scientific advisory committee, to tenderers expected to have an academic background.

There also will be input into the study by a consultative forum which includes representatives



from the ex-servicemen's community and the RAAF.

"We want you to have your say in this study," Dr Horsley said.

"This is in many ways your study."

Dr Horsley said research would not begin until a tenderer was selected and a protocol written and approved by an ethics committee.

He said workers who were worried should see their own doctors now.

"You should be sensible, prudent and cautious."

Dr Horsley said the health study would involve a questionnaire, tests and a detailed medical and psychological examination.

Dr Horsley said a mortality comparison would be carried out between the workers and a control group.

The final report will aim to list health problems and long-term solutions.

Enquiries to 1800 502 302.





# Exclusive

By STEVE GRAY

HIGHLY toxic chemicals used in F-111 maintenance were discharged directly into Warrill Creek, RAAF documents reveal.

The chemical SR-51, now the subject of the biggest inquiry ever held by the Australian Defence Force, was used in the deseal and reseal of the F-111 fuel tanks.

A Board of Inquiry was established in July last year to inquire into the long-term health effects of the process on up to 800 veterans and their families.

The inquiry is also investigating the effect on the environment.

In a memorandum dated April 18, 1978, Wing Commander G.J. Murphy, senior medical officer, stated that SR51 and Avtur (aviation turbine fuel) were being dumped.

"Avtur and SR-51 are being discharged directly into Warrill Creek which is downstream from the base flows through local cattle farms," the memo said.

Meanwhile, documents obtained by *The Queensland Times* establish that the RAAF had health concerns about SR-51 as early as 1979.

A Minute Paper pre-

pared by Squadron Leader C.E. Oliver on August 20, 1979, said "personnel involved in (reseal/deseal) are now disturbed to find that they are to be subjected to special medical surveillance, a factor which tends to negate the previous assertion that health was not at risk".

SR-51 is a mixture of four chemicals. Its manufacturer warns it could cause dizziness, nausea, fatigue, dermatitis and liver damage.

Component chemicals are hazardous to the reproductive system, central nervous system, and skin and are a cancer risk according to manufacturer Eldorado Chemicals.

A specific warning was given about the effect of petroleum solvent Dimethyl Acetamide on the environment.

A spokesman for Chief of the Air Force, Air Marshal Errol McCormack, said the documents obtained by the QT would form part of the evidence to the inquiry.

"We want it as open and transparent an inquiry as is possible," the spokesman said.

"Our immediate concern is for the health and welfare of those affected."

# Health and family hurt

By **Steve Gray**

UP to 1400 RAAF and civilian workers may have been involved in the deseal and reseal of the F-111 fuel tanks at Amberley, and the disposal of used chemicals.

The Board of Inquiry into the various deseal/reseal schemes heard evidence that workers were exposed to 100 times the recommended level of the highly toxic SR51, that safety equipment was inadequate and workers' complaints ignored.

The following is the testimony of one of the more than 400 workers who have suffered long-term damage to their health.

*"I have skin cancers or solar skin damage on my scalp, forehead, face and arms. I also have claw toes and my left foot bows out. I have lodged a claim for these impairments with the Department of Veterans Affairs and receive a 60% disability pension. I continue to suffer blood pressure problems which date back to my days at Amberley.*

*I have also suffered haemorrhoids with intermittent bleeding from the bowel. I have a lump in my throat which makes it intermittently hard to swallow...I still have a sore throat and am always coughing. I have bad breath*

*and my wife is always telling me that I have an awful smell from my body which is not regular body odour. I also get a red rash on my face and suffer from headaches and dizziness, especially when my wife is using any cleaning product around the house. I am at times very depressed and this has put a strain on my relationship with my wife...and with my family.*

*For some years I have not been interested in sex. I get very cranky and yell and snap at my wife for apparently no reason at all.*

*My wife tells me there is something wrong with me and I should see a doctor. She tells me I am not the same man she knew before our posting to Amberley.*

*I suffer from broken sleep patterns and was always a good eater but now find my appetite is gone. I generally only pick at food. I believe I have lost concentration and my short-term memory is lacking. I seem to be able to absorb only about three to five minutes of information at a time.*

*My wife has noted my short term memory loss...I remember when I was first covered in SR51 I felt sick in the stomach that night and had a splitting headache... I still get headaches frequently."*

## Tragic timeline unveiled

- ❑ **October 1963:** Australia orders 24 General Dynamics F-111s;
- ❑ **June 1973:** F-111s delivered to Australia;
- ❑ **1977-82:** First deseal/reseal program;
- ❑ **1985-92:** Wings deseal/reseal program;
- ❑ **1991-93:** Second deseal/reseal program;
- ❑ **1993-94:** Six F-111 G models obtained from USAF;
- ❑ **1996-99:** Third deseal/reseal program;
- ❑ **1996-99:** Spray seal program;
- ❑ **Jan 2000:** Deseal/reseal halted after workers complain of health effects;
- ❑ **July 2000:** Board of Inquiry (BoI) announced;
- ❑ **March 2001:** BoI begins;
- ❑ **Sept 2001:** Results of BoI announced, Interim health care scheme for workers announced;
- ❑ **Late 2001:** Health study to begin;
- ❑ **Mid-2003:** Health study to be completed;
- ❑ **2020:** Planned end of service of F-111s.

# Health scheme established

A UNIQUE health scheme will be introduced for former maintenance workers on the deseal/reseal of the F-111s at Amberley, the Federal government announced yesterday.

The interim health care scheme will comprise an initial medical examination, treatment for potentially related conditions and support counselling.

Veterans' Affairs Minister Bruce Scott said the scheme would allow for treatment while a health study, expected to take

two years, was completed.

"Health care will be available to all personnel, service and civilian, who took part in the deseal/reseal program during the late '70s though until January 2000, and immediate family of affected personnel will be able to access support counselling under the scheme," Mr Scott said.

Former personnel and their families are required to register with the F-111 Deseal/Reseal Health Care Scheme by calling 1800 728 007.

Former RAAF maintenance worker Ray Webster, who was involved in the first deseal/reseal program from 1977 to 1980, said he was pleased the report had found health complaints could be attributed to chemicals.

"We've known this since about 1983 that we've been damaged by the chemicals and it's good news that they've worked this out," Mr Webster said.

Mr Scott said the government had a duty of care to those in need of help.



**Culture change:** Chief of the Air Force, Air Marshal Angus Houston, promises the RAAF will put people before aircraft in future.

# F-111 inquiry slams work practices

By **STEVE GRAY**

THE RAAF would put people before aircraft in future, the Chief of the Air Force, Air Marshal Angus Houston, said yesterday.

Air Marshal Houston released a scathing Board of Inquiry report into past RAAF work practices at Amberley during the desal and reseal of the F-111s fuel tanks.

The \$7.2 million board of inquiry, the biggest ever held by the defence forces, interviewed 700 people and amassed 1.5 million pages of documents.

Its major finding was that health problems experienced by RAAF and civilian workers were "reasonably attributable" to their exposure to chemicals.

The report admitted the process "resulted in long-term health problems for hundreds of air force workers" which resulted from "the tendency of the military to put platforms (aircraft) before people".

The report said the work was dirty and stressful. Workers were exposed to foul-smelling chemicals which affected even their social and family lives.

It said workers' complaints were ignored, audit and review procedures were inadequate, the chain of command had failed and political decisions had increased the problems.

"Senior officers had relatively little conception of what was happening on the hangar floor," the report said.

"These weaknesses at the up-

per level of the chain of command stem fairly directly from government policy decisions lying largely outside the control of the air force," the report said.

These included downsizing of the RAAF and the fact senior officers were diverted due to the privatisation of maintenance procedures.

"The air force medical service was seen as failing, in particular by the low priority given to occupational medicine," the board found.

The report recommended 53 changes to RAAF procedures, all of which had been accepted, Air Marshal Houston said.

"I want people to know that today's air force puts people first, and that includes families," he said.

"While we cannot change the past, we can ensure that the current and future working environments are safe for our people."

An advocate, or "airmen's friend" with direct access to the Chief of the Air Force will be appointed to help veterans of the process seek advice and compensation.

A Defence Workplace Safety Office will be established to implement the recommendations of the board.

Many of the reforms will apply across the Australian Defence Organisation, and Air Marshal Houston has sought the co-operation of the Chief of the Defence Force and the Secretary of Defence in their implementation.



**Scathing report:** Reform of RAAF procedures, and help for desal/reseal veterans will follow the release of the Board of Inquiry's findings.

# Toxic chemicals left husband a changed man

**"I HAVE skin cancers or solar skin damage on my scalp, forehead, face and arms. I also have claw toes and my left foot bows out.**

**"My wife tells me that I am not the same man she knew before our posting to Amberley" — RAAF Amberley worker exposed to toxic chemicals (F-111 Deseal/Reseal Inquiry, chapter 1).**

RAAF veterans of the deseal/reseal process would establish their own association funded by and with direct access to the Chief of the Air Force, a former Amberley worker said yesterday.

They would also receive immediate, free medical treatment for health prob-

lems caused by their exposure to chemicals.

Ian Fraser, of Forest Lake, and other former "goop troops" met Air Marshal Angus Houston at Amberley to discuss a report into the process which may have caused health problems to up to 1400 RAAF and civilian personnel.

"Medical treatment has been our number one priority and that has been met," Mr Fraser said.

He said he also had a commitment that veterans could have their compensation claims processed immediately rather than waiting for two years or more for the results of a health

study of the personnel involved.

The health study could also help assess any effects on veterans' children, he said.

Mr Fraser urged veterans of the program to contact him by email at [Goop\\_troop@hotmail.com](mailto:Goop_troop@hotmail.com)

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