



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEES

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 25 June 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Thursday, 25 June 2009
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Questioner
Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (10.27 am)—by leave—I rise to lend support to the bipartisan report from the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Sealing a just outcome: report from the inquiry into RAAF F111 deseal/reseal workers and their families*. It is important that the coalition puts on record its tremendous thanks to the Chair of the Defence Subcommittee, the member for Brisbane, Arch Bevis, for his leadership in delivering what I think is an outstanding report to bring closure to what has been a very difficult issue that has gone on for over 35 years. I also thank my colleagues who were part of the committee, the secretariat—Dr Margot Kerley and Muz Ali, the inquiry secretary—and our defence advisers, Colonel Nothard and Wing Commander Ashworth. I extend a special thanks to the Deputy Chief of Air Force, Air Vice Marshal Geoff Brown, for his attendance at all committee meetings and his tremendous honesty.

The people of our nation may not realise that the F111 is one of the great unique aircraft of the world. First delivered to Australia in 1973, it has an enormous range of many thousands of kilometres, but to achieve that range it literally shoves fuel into every nook and cranny that you could possibly imagine on an aircraft. Modern aircraft have purpose-built fuel tanks and bladders—not the F111. If there was a space into which anything could go, fuel would be shoved there to give the aircraft its incredibly long range. Unfortunately, when the aircraft was delivered in 1973, having sat in hangars for a number of years, the sealant inside these nooks and crannies had begun to fall apart and the aircraft literally leaked fuel. It was not as simple as a hole in a balloon with water coming out. The leak could run along a line where metal joined and, where the sealant had broken down, the leak might come out one or two metres further downstream on the aircraft.

Thus, from the very first year of delivery, 1973, RAAF men were sent inside the smallest nooks and crannies imaginable in F111 aircraft. In 1973 out on the tarmac there were no sheds, no covers. In scorching heat, in an Amberley summer, these men would crawl in, many of them in shorts and T-shirts with no personal protective equipment, to carefully pick off the sealant, trace where the hole was and then reseal it. Prior to that activity, they would drain all the fuel from the fuel tanks, but these men would still be sitting in fuel for many, many hours at a time to trace these leaks and to

reseal the fuel tanks so that our forward strike bomber could continue its role and continue to provide both a deterrent and a strike capacity. For over 25 years, men were sent into fuel tanks, first of all to pick and patch and then, as part of four formal programs, to fully deseal and reseal fuel tanks. Whilst in the latter part of those 25 years personal protective equipment and oxygen were used, in the early years none of that existed. The photographs in the report and the evidence we received are testimony to that.

Over time it became evident that men were getting sick and were suffering from a whole range of ubiquitous and unknown illnesses. It came to a point where one doctor on base who was there for an extended period of time pulled all the threads together and realised: ‘Houston, we have a significant problem.’ To the current CDF, who was then the Chief of Air Force, must go immense credit. A board of inquiry was instituted to look at the issues regarding the F111 desealing and resealing. This was followed by an interim healthcare scheme and a study of the health outcomes in aircraft maintenance personnel called the SHOAMP study. In August 2005 the former government moved to provide an ex gratia payment to those who had been involved in the four formal programs only.

Then this inquiry was born. I was immensely impressed when, at the very start of the inquiry, the Deputy Chief of Air Force, Air Vice Marshal Geoff Brown, stood up and said, ‘We are here because the Air Force has damaged its personnel.’ There was no move by the Air Force to run and hide. They sent in the Deputy Chief of Air Force, their No. 2 man, to stand there at a public inquiry and to admit that the Air Force had damaged its men and, as a consequence, had damaged Air Force families. I put on the record my great pride in the Defence Force for standing up and admitting that there was a problem and that they indeed had got it wrong.

It is with some pleasure that I join the member for Brisbane, and all members of the committee, to table the report and to point out its significant recommendations. They include widening the ex gratia payments to those involved in the pick and patch operation to recognise that it was not just under the four formal programs that men went inside the nooks and crannies of the aircraft. Many, many men, from

1973 until when the four formal programs began, squeezed themselves into the narrowest of holes in the sides of aircraft to spend many, many hours at a time, sometimes using delicate dental equipment, to carefully pick the sealant off the frames of the aircraft. As part of the inquiry we went down to Amberley. I managed to squeeze inside one of the nooks and crannies of these F111s. I can tell you that, after spending only a few minutes in there, I would dread the thought of spending hours and, in cumulative terms, days carefully picking off sealant—and, in the early days, doing it in a pair of shorts and a shirt, covered in aviation fuel.

Other recommendations include widening the healthcare support to those members of the pick and patch operation and removing any cut-off dates that may restrict access to this healthcare support. The committee also recommended allowing statutory declarations to be used in order to prove entitlements, cognisant that records going back some 35 years in many cases do not exist. We recommended providing counselling services and significant respite care to families who are dealing with very, very sick former Air Force men. Seeking a review of all cases where DVA has knocked back claims because of inadequate statutory declarations is, I think, another important recommendation.

Part of the important information the hearing took had to do with health care. Substantial studies have been conducted. Looking at the third health study, it was shown that the cancer rates in those men who were involved in this work, going back to 1973, were 44 per cent higher than the control group or the average population in the nation. Unfortunately, in medical terms this was deemed to be statistically insignificant—a phrase I have come to despise. I understand why the medical fraternity call it statistically insignificant when they are only dealing with fewer than 900 cases. But what I found disappointing was that it would have been statistically significant if two more cancers had been recognised! If two more RAAF men had contracted cancer, bringing the number higher than 44 per cent, it would have been statistically significant. I think we can all assume that a 44 per cent higher cancer rate in men who went into fuel tanks to deseal and reseal is significant. The significance is such that this report is being tabled today.

One of the causes of the cancers was assumed to be a product called SR51 that has a dreadful odour and was used to deseal inside the fuel tanks. It was surprising to me and other members of the committee that no medical evidence was found to support the claim that SR51 was indeed involved. The evidence would seem to point more to a combination of environmental, chemical, heat and other substance factors all working

together. Further health studies have been strongly recommended in the report, especially into the impact of aviation turbine fuels on the health of individuals.

I think the report is significant. It significantly widens access to the ex gratia payments and, more importantly, to health support for those who were involved in all areas of crawling into tanks to keep our operational aircraft online. It is fitting that I conclude my remarks by thanking our F111 community in its entirety. Since 1973, men, women and their families have worked hard to keep our operational bomber strike aircraft online. Sometimes in the most dreadful of conditions and the most terrible of circumstances, they have sacrificed much to ensure the safety and security of our nation. We owe a lot to heroes like these who sacrifice their time to serve us, the wider Australian community. So I thank the F111 community. I thank those who sacrificed so much to ensure that a strike capability and a great deterrent was operational in the skies above our land.