By Paul Daley
Photography Richard Whitfield

Forced to crawl inside F111s through toxic sludge and fumes, these men are now doomed to a living death while Canberra looks the other way.

Llau Henney mows the lawn and washes up. On a bad day, the dishes can take an hour-and-a-half. He gets breathless, his body aches and the exertion of merely shifting them from sudsbucket to dishdrainer, impels him to stop, exhausted, to rest. The back lawns of his Brisbane home can take two days to mow. He needs three to recover.

These ceaseless tasks are all that link the husk of Allan Henney to the man he was in 1981: an optimistic young father with a promising career as an electrician in the Royal Australian Air Force. He insists on mowing and washing-up as if they were the last threads of his humanity, just as he clings to the mundane routine of daytime snoozes, endless doctors’ appointments and pottering around that form his twilight existence.

Allan Henney is 66. His wife says he looks 65. It breaks her heart. "Our plan was that we’d still be enjoying ourselves in middle age. The kids would be gone and we could travel. Tomorrow’s our 25th wedding anniversary. But there’s no party – he can’t go to parties any more."

Says Kathleen Henney, a slim, turned, intelligent woman who comes from generations of RAAF stock.

"We know they are all dead men walking. It’s a reality we all have to face and come to terms with. I know it wounds hard and callous. But it’s true. They are dead men walking."

Allan Henney is slowly, prematurity painfully fading away because the air force that he loved poisoned him. It exposed him to a multitude of highly toxic chemicals that were used to clean and re-seal the fuel tank of Australia’s fleet of F111 strike-bombers from 1973 until 2000. Since 1981, when he began experiencing mood swings, depression and crippling headaches, while working on the planes, Henney’s health has steadily declined. He had dozens of carcinomas removed, his joints have seized, his respiratory and immune systems are shot and for 14 years he suffered weeping ulcers all over his body. In 1999, the doctors told Kathleen and their three children, Allan wouldn’t survive the year.

But on he fights – as one of at least 400, but by some estimates as many as 800, seriously ill victims of a scandal that resulted from a mind-boggling, negligent and deadly failure in the RAAF’s chain of command. It is clear that RAAF commanders at Amberley Air Force base near Ipswich, west of Brisbane, where the F111s are based, didn’t just allow two generations of technicians to work with chemicals they know to be potentially deadly. They made them. Their health, it seems, was a small price to pay to keep the F111s airborne.

Countless former servicemen who worked on the de-seal/re-seal (DS/RES) program at Amberley have died of dreadful diseases. Some have taken their own lives. Others severely brain-damaged men, lost inside the Kafkaesque maze that is Australia’s military compensation system, are frustrated to the point of suicide.

This tragedy is compounded by the victims’ ages: many are in their 50s, 40s and early 30s – people whose best years have been stolen just when they should be enjoying the rewards of middle age. Instead, they are living appraising, confused and uncertain final years and months. TONY BRADY, 40
A July 2001 military Board of Inquiry found the RAAF command at Amberley culpably failed to protect its personnel due to a chain of command malfunction. In layman’s terms, this means an inferior officer put the health of his men ahead of the aircraft. In late 1999, when a new sergeant complained, de-seal operations were immediately suspended.

At a time when a federal parliamentary committee is about to report on failures in the military justice system, the episode stands as a shocking indictment of a “group think” culture that pervades sections of the military and allows such injustices— even, arguably, criminal—practices to continue unchecked. No senior RAAF personnel have ever been punished. The committee has given no in-depth consideration to the episode.

The 2001 military inquiry found “...the scale and duration of the problem indicates that we are dealing with a deep-seated failure for which no single individual or group of individuals can reasonably be held accountable.”

Meanwhile, a health study concluded the de-sealers were 50% more likely to develop cancers than other military personnel and that many suffered from depression, erectile dysfunction, skin and respiratory diseases, cardiovascular and neurological disease, mood swings and memory problems.

Anecdotally, an incredible number of de-sealers’ wives have miscarried or given birth to children with abnormalities. Many of their children are now experiencing reproductive problems. Many have failed to end up at any sort of living situation being medicated. Hundreds of marriages have failed. Domestic violence, etc.

Military aircraft technicians are drawn from the top 5% to 10% of society’s KG pool. It is compelling, then, that the University of Newcastle health study concluded the de-sealers today live among the 50% of society with the poorest lifestyle and health.

This is a dark, disturbing story with no prospect of a happy ending. Its central characters will never recover. Not even the swift delivery of compensation— as promised by the federal government—could change that.

This story’s only light comes through the window it opens onto a human spiral that compels these desperate people to keep fighting the system they so unquestioningly, so patriotically served.

It is a harrowing experience to sit with two desperately ill mates, both fathers in early middle age, while they lambaste de-sealers as if it were merely another medical treatment open to them.

Frank Cooper, 47, has the delivery, timing and presence of a stand-up comic. When you shake his knobby hand, courted by arthritis and punctuated by the space formerly inhabited by the amputated finger, you realise everything’s wrong. He’s edgy and anxious, like most former de-sealers, he suffers terrifying panic attacks, and though they are the least of his medical problems. He is eager to launch into his story. For who knows? Tomorrow he mightn’t remember it.

But he defers to the younger, more obviously ill man, 46-year-old Bob Sokolowski. Sokolowski has gone irreversibly to seed. Of course, it’s impossible to stay fit when you’ve got chemically induced diabetes and you’re debilitated by migraines and blackouts, depression, nerve damage in your feet and hands, chronically high blood pressure, bowel and digestive diseases and respiratory problems.

His marriage has failed.

On top of all that, there’s the final indignity: the lingering emotional insecurity born of having been unable to get it up for years.

But Frank is a mate. So he can hang shit on Rob. He does so mercilessly and, as they sit in Rob’s living room in Donnybrook on the coast north of Brisbane, they bounce off one another like some dark version of The? Two Ronnies.

“We can’t remember what fuckin’ day it is,” Frank says, gesturing to Rob. “Ask him if he wants a cup of tea... We’ll go and make one, forget he’s done it and five minutes later make another one. There’ll be three cups of tea sitting there and he’ll go and make another one. You should go for a drive with him... I mean, no fuckin’ way... you wouldn’t get in a car with the bastard.”

Both snort laugh hysterically. There’s no pretence. Just the gallows humour of the condemned.

The mood quickly segues from black comedy to tragedy.

“Go on,” Frank urges, “tell him about what we were discussing just before he arrived.”

“What?” stammers Rob. “Was suicide, do you mean?”

“Youh—suicide,” says Frank.
"Yeah, mate, yeah... suicide," says Bob, twitching as he turns to address me. "We've both been short, so often it's not funny. You feel so shithead all the time, and you can't remember anything so you let people down constantly. Then there's the remenanted voices, so you're bloody impossible to live with. And then there's just this constant fight for the compensation and money worries that just wears you down further and further. The frustration and stress is huge. I can tell you, the only reason I'm alive today is because I live with a 23-year-old 1800b-boy (his son, with whom he lives alone) who supports me so wonderfully. He walks ever and gives me a big hug and says, 'Dad, are you gonna be OK?'. What do I say? I know I won't be.'

It's his son's 13th birthday today. Rob would have forgotten. Except his Palm V60 reminded him with the message: GET UP – IT'S NICK'S BIRTHDAY! TRY AND BE HAPPY. He tries hard to be a good dad. He feels guilty because there's so much he can't do.

Frank, now three years into his third marriage, has two kids. He's only just hung onto this wife who, like the partners of most former de-sealers, hates his pain and finds him cantankerous and unpredictable, but mostly sad.

"A week after the honeymoon for my third marriage, we came back from Perth and straight away I had a complete breakdown because I was so stressed that I'll lose her too... how do you think that made her feel?"

He's had a heart attack and suffers severe paranoia that makes him shed layers of skin, snake-like, in the bed every night. Chronic spondylitis has resulted in five vertebrae being surgically fused, accounting for his hunched appearance; he'll be in a wheelchair before long. He drives with a restricted licence and can't move his head much. In 1998, he was diagnosed with chronic sacroiliitis, a rare asbestos-like condition (common among former de-sealers) that causes fungus to grow in the lungs and robs the victim of breath. A typical week comprises visits to the hydrotherapist, the physiotherapist, the podiatrist, the dermatologist, the ENT, the ophthalmologist and the cardiologist. Work is unthistleable.

Like Bob, he has a small total and permanent disability pension and a medical Gold Card from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. But there is no formal acknowledgement that their ailments resulted from working on the de-seal program and both gave up trying to negotiate pension backpay when they became stuck in a bureaucratic quagmire. Neither has been compensated.

"I've got on the phone – we've all got on the phone – and said, 'I'm going to top myself unless you sort this out'. But they don't give a shit," says Frank. "I know I might have 10 years left. So it's time the bastards stopped fucking us around – it's just chewing up what precious time we've got left. (Defence Minister) Robert Hill made that statement last year - he said we'll be compensated. Well, where is it? Our lives are on bloody hold and the frustration and the stress is only making us worse – it's killing us.'

Later, as Frank Cooper drives me to the train station, he says: 'Mate, I'm really worried about Bob. He's got no one, you know, to support him. No one.'

How old is he one to this?"
service personnel worked on the F111 tanks, the US military perhaps sensing a future health scandal - readily used labour from Latin America.

But for the Australians assigned to DSRS at Amberley, it was backbreaking, claustrophobic, physically and mentally isolating, demoralising and potentially deadly work. For dozens of mentally unbalanced troops as young as 17, de-seal was their first posting after finishing apprenticeships in Waggas Wagga. ‘What was I going to do when they sent me to de-seal? No, sir?’ says Festus Cooper. ‘Come on, I mean I was 17 years old.’

For months at a time they would work in a makeshift kiln: hungers, segregated from the rest of the base due to the foul smell of the chemicals. The technicians would crawl crouched or lying horizontally in the tanks, covered in chemicals and surrounded by flames, for up to eight hours at a time.

The SK31 corroded their protective glasses in minutes and ate away their flimsy cotton overalls. Cumbrous respiratory gear was rarely worn because it made crawling through the tanks near impossible.

The workers were ordered not to wear jockeys under their overalls because the chemicals would melt them.

‘So you were sitting there in cotton overalls and this stuff - SK31 and other chemicals - were soaking into your cock and balls through the flimsy overalls - no wonder we've got all these sexual problems,' says Bob Solomon.

'It's like a psychiatric ward, it's like the tank is the ward. You're just in there and you're stuck in there and you can't get out of it. You're just feeling yourself feeling crushed and you're in the tank and you're feeling yourself being crushed and you're feeling yourself being crushed and you're feeling yourself being crushed.'

The de-sealers were outraged because of their smell. When the SK31 combined with body fat, it produced an odour likened to a mixture of old socks, rotten eggs, sweat, dirt and ammonia. The de-sealers were consequently banned from the base cinema, the mess and the booms. The smell was impulsive to showering. Wires and girlfriends slept in their sleep. Single men staying in barracks were given the own rooms.

All the while the de-sealers' bodies tried to purge the poison by expelling a stinking yellow grease - a combination of body fat and noxious chemicals. The odour permanently stained bed sheets, clothings.

'T's a beautiful piece of machinery - I love the F111. It still gives me goose bumps when I hear the afterburners crack up for take-off. It's a sound you can never get enough of.'

So says Geoff Cui, who, at 42, might pass for a man in his 50s. He's yet another former de-sealer whose trusted health is the legacy of keeping the F111 airborne. For more than 20 years he has suffered deafness, chronic bowel problems, arthritis, painful calcium deposits in his hands and shoulders, peeling joints, arthrogryphosis, panic attacks, depression, dangerous mood swings and obsessive compulsive disorder. He's an obvious target.

The illnesses have, by their own admission, made him a nightmare to live with.

'I have been violent towards my wife and my kids,' he says. 'I was also violent towards my first wife. I see red and I just snap. My wife is fantastic - for what she puts up with. She deserves recognition.'

As part of his quest to get compensation, Cui has numerous doctors at the heart of the military authorities.

He maintains they were 'doctor shopping' to find a diagnosis that would downplay his illness. While he receives a disability pension and his medical costs are covered by a veteran's Affairs Gold Card, he has received no compensation.

'The fear that I have is that my life will be cut short ... and [then] will leave my wife and children with very little. This is a real fear for me... I have my good friends of mine, also ex-de-sealers, die at early ages of rapidly growing cancers,' he says.

'Quality of life has gone... it's a life destroyed by the deliberate actions of RAAF officers who, with a blatant disregard for the life of the service personnel involved,'
chose to ignore all the warnings they had received about the chemicals we were using, and said, "Just do it." Not one of them has apologized. Not one."

Terry Bray began his apprenticeship two weeks after his 16th birthday. Soon "Mouse," as he was known because of his tiny frame, was crawling inside the tanks. His size made him perfect for the job.

"I was used to access a lot of the smaller tanks and especially those that required moving past plumbing still in place. It often took over an hour of manoeuvring through the insides of the F11 to access my work area, and longer to get out. I would lie [sic] still and avoid being confused in such a small area for several hours that it made it difficult to work my way back out. We were required to have LFTs [liver function tests] every three months," he says. "One day, shortly after the blood tests, I got a call from medical section and they jokingly labeled me if I was glowing yellow... it turns out enzymes within my liver were more than 10 times their normal reading and I was taken out of de-peak immediately."

Brody's health is ruined. He is 40. His second marriage recently failed. "My psychiatrist tells me that chemical poisoning has affected my mental health... I have panic disorder, I'm bipolar and suffer from anxiety. Physically, my whole respiratory system is shot, I get bronchitis four or five times a year. I have chronic rhinitis and chronic allergic conjunctivitis, and I suffer from long-term infections due to my immune system not being able to handle things," Brody, like the rest, awaits compensation.

Last year, Defence Minister Robert Hill promised the workers they would be compensated for their exposure to the chemicals - though not, it must be emphasised, for their immense pain and suffering or loss of earnings. The families of the dead stand to get nothing.

On October 26, Hill said he would take a submission to federal cabinet before Christmas recommending a single compensation scheme for the former de-peakers.

Hill said: "Obviously, at the time, the use of those chemicals and other materials in those confined spaces was not understood to be dangerous in the way that it's turned out to be. It's something we clearly regret and we accept our responsibility to properly support and, where appropriate, compensate those who have suffered.

For compensation specific to their injuries, the de-peakers must look through the courts (22 of them, including Cooper and Bosman, who are frustrated with waiting for military compensation of Hill's re-gratia payment, are suing the federal government, each for $900,000) or apply within the consolidated guidelines of several overlapping military compensation schemes.

There is further mounting anxiety among the former de-peakers that changes to the legislative definitions of impairment for lump-sum Commonwealth claimsant injured before July 2004 will make it even harder for them to get compensation.

Under the changes, that which is currently defined as 10% impairment will be re-defined - or effectively downgraded - to a 5% impairment. Those who are not 50% incapacitated will be ineligible for compensation. They'll also lose the right to see their employers, even if the employer was negligent.

As Fraser, a former de-peaker with a range of serious health problems, now runs the F11 De-peak Re-sale Support group with the help of Kathleen Henry and Liz Agerbeek, whose seriously ill husband Rudi also worked in the tanks. While they have energetically lob-bied the federal government on behalf of the injured and have done much to keep the de-peakers in the papers of the local press in Queensland where most of them still live, Fraser is now calling for a royal commission into the military compensation system.

"OK, so we've had the board of inquiry which identified the problem, we've had the health study which showed we were injured by the chemicals, the government has promised us compensation, but we're still waiting. They should be treating this as a humanitarian issue, not a political problem," he says.

"Rokos are dying [the support group estimates 40 or 50 have died since the board of inquiry] while they wait for compensation and get shuffled from agency to agency and doctor to doctor."

"Enough is enough. We need a royal commission into the way these people have been treated before more are mistreated in the same way. Everyone's had enough."

"We need grief counselling because we know all these men are going to die," Liz Agerbeek says matter-of-factly.

It's a mother-child relationship developed between the wives and their own. It's not healthy. We all do it for them. We do not have normal healthy relations... those plans have ruined our lives."

While Curtin University in Western Australia is con-ducting a lifestyle impact study on the partners of the de-peakers, no quantitative research has been conducted into the health of their offspring. But anecdotal evidence (supported by postings on the support group's website www.gpgrroup.com) abounds that countless children of the F11 workers were born with defects.

They include Allan and Kathleen's son Sean, who was conceived while his father worked in the tanks. He was born with respiratory and learning problems. He also suffers from a rare disease, cistic fibrosis, which causes tumours to grow from the bone.

"When he was a little boy, he developed another bone out of his shoulder blade. He's had five growths like this removed from his body. As a little boy, he used to ask us what was going on and we told him it was growing spare parts," Kathleen says.

Doctors gave Sean a life expectancy of 30. He's just turned 21 - a little younger than his father, Allan, when he first crawled into the bowls of an F11. How cruel it is that the F11 will be almost 50 when it's eventually retired from service.