

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.*

**A**LLAN HENRY 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 suds to dishrack impels him to stop, exhausted, to rest. The back lawn of his Brisbane home can take two days to mow. He needs three to recover.

These prosaic tasks are all that link the husk of Allan Henry 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 Henry is 46. 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."

# Dead servicemen walking

says Kathleen Henry, a slim, tanned, 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 sounds hard and callous. But it's true. They *are* dead men walking."

Allan Henry is slowly, prematurely, painfully fading away because the air force that he loved poisoned him.

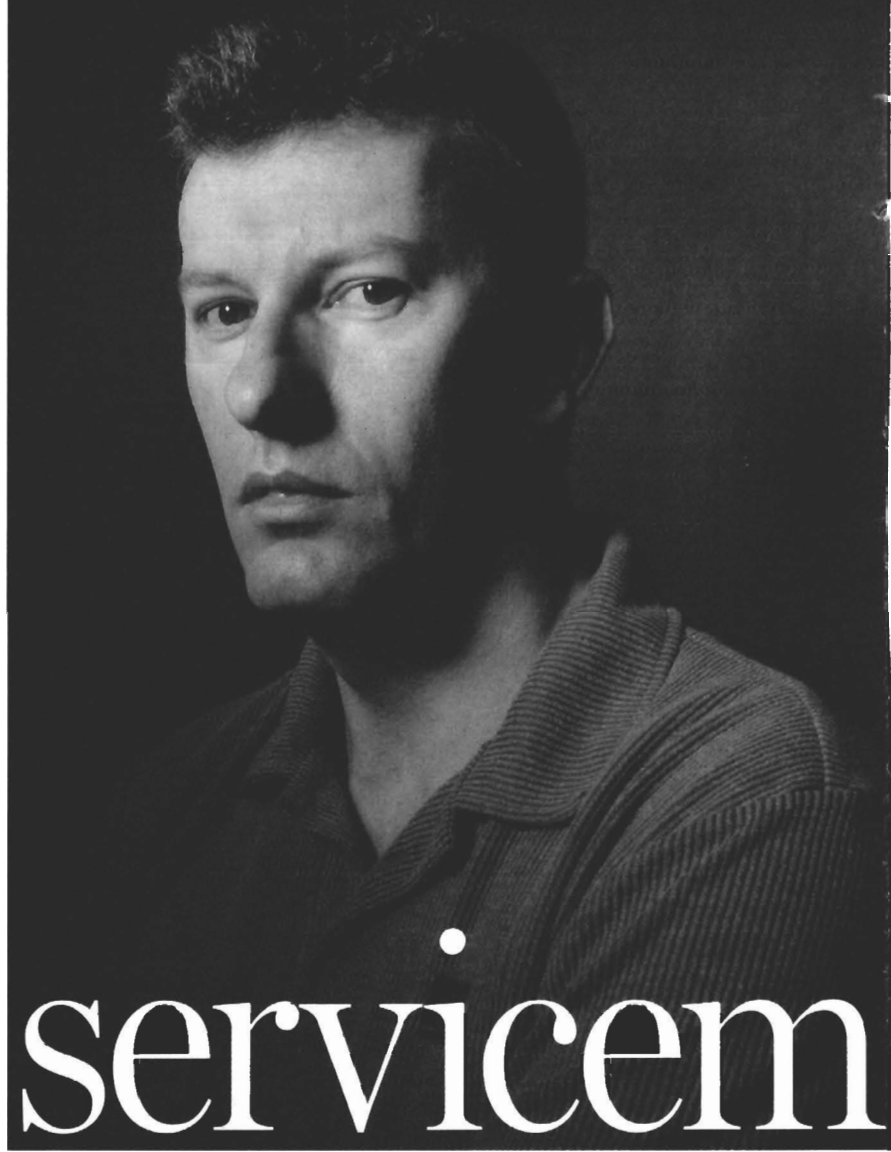
It exposed him to a multitude of highly toxic chemicals that were used to clean and re-seal the faulty fuel tanks of Australia's fleet of F111 strike-bombers from 1973 until 2000. Since 1981, when he began experiencing mood swings, depression and crippling headaches while working on the planes, Henry's health has steadily declined. He's had dozens of carcinomas removed, his joints have seized, his respiratory and immune systems are shot and for 14 years he suffered weeping lesions 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 knew to be potentially deadly. They *made* them. Their health, it seems, was a small price to pay to keep the F111s airborne.

**C**ountless former servicemen who worked on the de-seal/re-seal (DSRS) program at Amberley have died of dreadful diseases. Some have taken their own lives. Other seriously 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 30s, 40s and early 50s - people whose best years have been stolen just when they should be enjoying the rewards of middle age. Instead, they are living agonising, confused and uncertain final years and months.



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 no superior officer put the health of his men ahead of the aircraft until 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 unjust - 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.

#### PRICE OF PATRIOTISM

Tony Brady's size (his nickname was 'Mouse') sent him further into the bowels of the F111s, while Geoff Curl has suffered multiple health problems

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 depres-

sion, erectile dysfunction, skin and respiratory diseases, cardiovascular and neurological disease, mood swings and memory problems.

Anecdotally, an inordinate 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 eke out any sort of living since being medically discharged. Hundreds of marriages have failed. Domestic violence is rife.

Military aircraft technicians are drawn from the top 5% to 10% of society's IQ pool. It is compelling, then, that the University of Newcastle health study concluded the de-sealers today live among the 30% 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 spirit that compels these desperate people to keep fighting the system they so unquestioningly, so patriotically served.

**I**t is a harrowing experience to sit with two desperately ill mates, both fathers in early middle age, while they blithely discuss suicide 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, contorted 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, 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 Rob Solomons. Solomons has gone irreversibly to seed. Of course, it's impossible to stay fit when you've got chemically induced dementia 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*.

"He can't remember what fuckin' day it is," Frank says, gesturing to Rob. "Ask him if he wants a cup of tea ... he'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 men 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. "Sss-suicide, do you mean?"

"Yeah - suicide," says Frank.

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**GEOFF CURL, 42**

"Yeah, mate, yeah ... suicide," says Rob, twitching as he turns to address me.

"We've both been there so often it's not funny. You feel so shithouse all the time, and you can't remember anything so you let people down constantly. Then there's the mmm-mood swings, 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 12-year-old bbbbb-boy [his son, with whom he lives alone] who supports me so wonderfully. He walks over 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 Pilot 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'd lose her, too ... how do you think that made her feel?"

He's had a heart attack and suffers severe psoriasis 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 1988, he was diagnosed with chronic sarcoidosis, a rare asbestosis-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 GP, the osteopath and the cardiologist. Work is unthinkable.

Like Rob, 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 acknowledgment 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'd 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 Rob. He's got no one, you know, to support him. No one."

How did it come to this?

In 1963 the Menzies government ordered 24 General Dynamics F111 long-range strike-bombers from the United States. Originally due for delivery in

1968, technical problems delayed their delivery until October 1973.

With their heavy payload of bombs and missiles, and their exceptional range - enabling them to fly to most Asian capitals and return to Australia without re-fuelling - they were intended as a deterrent to potentially hostile states in the region. The aircraft owes its range to its enormous fuel capacity. To this day the F111 - which will be withdrawn from service in 2010 - is effectively a flying fuel tank. But it was defective from the start; the tanks were designed without an internal bladder and soon after delivery, avgas began leaking through the metal seams in the wings and the fuselage.

The same problem had happened in the US and the Americans had perfected a technique known as "de-seal/re-seal", whereby the original sealants were stripped through an elaborate process of chemical application, high-pressure blasting and hand picking with small, sharp instruments, before new, equally toxic, sealant was applied. A cocktail of dozens of toxic chemicals was also used. Perhaps the most infamous was SR51, a de-sealant and proven carcinogen. While some American



**FRANK COOPER, 47**



**ROB SOLOMONS, 46**

**MATESHIP**  
Their gallows humour helps them cope with ruined lives but cannot hide the reality

service personnel worked on the F111 tanks, the US military – perhaps sensing a future health scandal – mainly used labour from Latin America.

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

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

The SR51 corroded their protective gloves in minutes and ate away their flimsy cotton overalls. Cumbersome 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

– SR51 and other chemicals – were soaking into your cock and balls through the flimsy overalls – no wonder we’ve got all these sexual problems,” says Rob Solomons.

“You’d lapse into unconsciousness, get dragged out of the tank, get left on the floor to sober up and put back in again.”

Those who complained were malingerers, slackers, even though many quickly developed severe health problems and were treated on the base and at the civilian hospital in nearby Ipswich. If the de-seal program was suspended due to health concerns, the F111s – whose flight crews were largely oblivious to the suffering of the maintenance crews – wouldn’t fly. This was unthinkable, as the board of inquiry noted.

One de-sealer with serious health problems who refused to re-enter the tanks was sentenced to seven days’ detention. Another was given the particularly onerous task of incinerating the SR51 goop once it congealed. He was constantly covered in the stuff, suffered the pro-forma headaches, dizziness, mood swings and depression, and complained, to no avail.

Even on the base, the de-sealers were ostracised because of their smell. When the SR51 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 boozier. The smell was impervious to showering. Wives and girlfriends slept in spare beds. Single men staying in barracks were given their 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 sludge permanently stained bed sheets and clothing.

“It’s a beautiful piece of machinery – I love the F111. It still gives me goose bumps when I hear the after-burners crack up for take-off. It’s a sound you can never get enough of.”

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

The illnesses have, by his 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, Curl saw numerous doctors at the behest of the military authorities.

He maintains they were “doctor shopping” to find a diagnosis that would downplay his illnesses. 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 big fear that I have is that my life will be cut short ... and [that] will leave my wife and children with very little. This is a real fear for me ... I have watched friends of mine, also ex de-sealers, die at early ages of rapidly growing cancers,” he says.

“My 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 apologised. Not one."

Tony Brady 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 inside of the F111 to access my work area, and longer to get out ... I would be [so] stiff and swollen from being confined 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 asked 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-seal immediately."

Brady's health is ruined. He is 40. His second marriage recently failed. "My psychiatrists tell me that chemical

compensation or Hill's ex-gratia payment, are suing the federal government, each for \$800,000) or apply within the convoluted guidelines of several overlapping military compensation schemes.

There is further mounting anxiety among the former de-sealers that changes to the legislative definitions of impairment for lump-sum Commonwealth claimants 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 10% incapacitated will be ineligible for compensation. They'll also lose the right to sue their employers, even if the employer was negligent.

Ian Fraser, a former de-sealer with a range of serious health problems, now runs the F111 De-seal Re-seal 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 lobbied the federal government on behalf of the injured and have done much to keep the de-sealers in the pages 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.

"Blokes 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 that's developed between the wives and their men. It's not healthy. All we do is care for them. We do not have normal healthy relationships ... those planes have ruined our lives."

While Curtin University in Western Australia is conducting a lifestyle impact study on the partners of the de-sealers, no quantifiable research has been conducted into the health of their offspring. But anecdotal evidence (supported by postings on the support group's website [www.gooptroop.com](http://www.gooptroop.com)) abounds that countless children of the F111 workers were born with defects.

They include Allan and Kathleen Henry'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, osteo chondroma, which causes tumours to grow from the bone.

"When he was a little boy, he effectively grew 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'd tell him he was growing spare parts," Kathleen says.

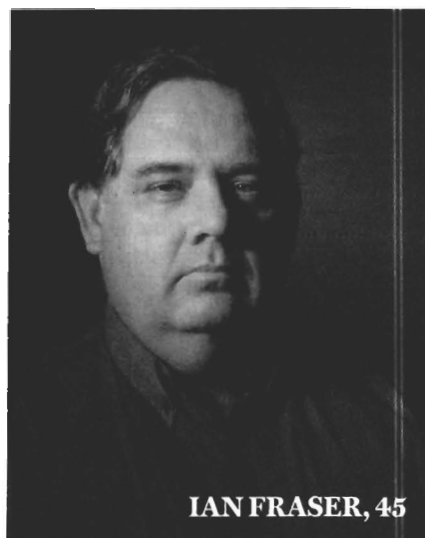
Doctors give Sean a life expectancy of 30.

He's just turned 21 - a little younger than his father, Allan, when he first crawled into the bowels of an F111.

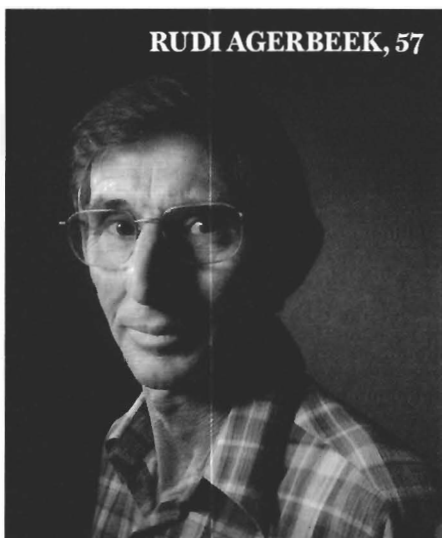
How cruel it is that the F111 will be almost 50 when it's eventually retired from service. ●

## STILL FIGHTING

Survivors and their wives are lobbying for a royal commission into the military compensation system



IAN FRASER, 45



RUDI AGERBEEK, 57

poisoning has affected my mental health ... I have panic disorder, I'm bipolar and suffer 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." Brady, 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-sealers.

Hill said: "Obviously, at the time, the use of those insolvents 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-sealers must go through the courts (21 of them, including Cooper and Solomons, who are frustrated with waiting for military