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Defence of F-111 maintenance workers falls short

When Australia first decided to buy the F-111, it looked like the answer to all our defence needs. Chests swelled with pride as we realised that Australia would eventually become the only country to which the United States was prepared to sell the plane. If we were a bit late in getting the aircraft, well, that was because it was so advanced and it was on the cutting edge of technology.

After all, this was the dawning of the space age, when mankind (yes, it was still man-kind in those days, and not some other inclusive word) still aspired to walk on the moon; as if planting a flag there could change our reality here on earth.

The plane itself was revolutionary and quite naturally, we focussed on the broader implications of what this new capability meant. The aircraft was so far ahead of anything in the region that it completely altered our strategic dynamic. It would (if ever needed) be capable of carving through any adversary's airspace and dropping a precision guided missile on the breakfast table of any dictator who threatened us. And, perhaps critically, always present in the background was the implied threat: this aircraft was designed as a nuclear bomber. We'd acquired a latent capability of our own.

But this is a story about how the bureaucracy copes – or doesn't cope – when it does something terribly wrong to a whole group of people.

What had gone missing in all the wishful calculations was concern about the little people who kept our deterrent flying. Oh, the pilots were venerated, of course, however we lost track of the others who had to crawl into the small, cramped spaces of the fuselage and wings to stop this new plane leaking fuel. Because the F-111 had been designed without a fuel tank to save weight. As it was when fully loaded, nearly half the planes' combat weight was propulsion for the jets. Technology hadn't yet moved to the advanced stage of having rubber bladders that would hold the highly combustible mix inside the aircraft until it was used,

so there was only one alternative. Maintenance workers were required to crawl into the confined, stinking, toxic spaces inside the aircraft itself, strip the old seals off, and then re-seal the joints from the inside, to stop the fuel leaking out of the body.

No one ever glorified these workers. If you ever doubt the price these people paid as they kept our deterrent flying, just read the testimony of their families. It was the wives who put the stained, filthy overalls in the wash when they'd come off the shifts and who lay in bed next to the men who sweated oil and chemicals as they lay in bed at night. They tried to cope, through the years of violent and unexplained mood-swings, while they watched their husbands' shrink into withdrawn shells, unable to cope with everyday life. And it was the women who also took the damaged sperm from their partners as they tried, but were inexplicably unable, to give birth to normal healthy children and live the Australian dream; just like a normal family.

Eventually, everything changed. As it happened, our recognition that something had gone very wrong coincided with Angus Houston's period in charge of the air force – or perhaps that wasn't by chance at all. Certainly he helped to cut through the maze of obfuscation that had surrounded the maintenance workers' health problems through the decades in which their problems were just ignored, while everyone hoped that the wheezing, cancerous people would just shuffle off. The defence mind-set had changed and sudden illumination galvanised the services; as if a switch had suddenly been flicked. The old traditions of care and responsibility came to the fore as Defence tried to do the right thing by the accidentally damaged people who's lives had been used up keeping our deterrent flying.

Nevertheless, doing the right thing never seems to some easily to governments. Compensation is administered by Veterans' Affairs, not the services. As soon as the issue became submerged in the bureaucracy, the good intentions of

the few became corrupted by the lethargy of the many. Government approved an ex-gratia payment, but only deployed three overworked officers and one harassed civilian to determine who'd be lucky enough to get a sum of money. This took time, and the families who'd hoped they might be getting \$400,000 found out the payment would be just \$40,000. Then came the arguments about who'd get this and who should just receive the paltry sum of \$10,000, or even nothing at all.

Government, in its wisdom, had specifically only assigned compensation to the official F-111 re-sealing program. This had begun some years after the plane was purchased, so the people who'd been assigned to check the fuel tanks before a bureaucratic name had been assigned to their task got nothing. Perhaps worst of all, they were effectively told they'd done nothing. And the years dragged on.

Now, finally, Parliament has got involved again to sort things out. Incredulity and restrained anger sharply intersected with the slow procedural dance of the bureaucracy at last week's hearings in Canberra.

Defence committee chairman Arch Bevis (Labor, Brisbane) admitted he was just a lay-person, but he still wanted to know "how do you have a 50 per cent increase in the likelihood of getting cancer . . . and then have that dismissed as not statically significant". Senator Russell Troad (Liberal, Queensland) ripped into one witness, commenting, "you are mincing words, aren't you?" An incredulous Senator Mark Bishop (Labor, WA) insisted "we have 500 men and their families . . . this has been going on since 1978. They are still campaigning for justice. I cannot recall in 12 years where I have read such a damning commentary."

When Senator Mathias Cormann (Liberal, WA) asked, "who made the decision on how to structure the ex-gratia payment", the response was that it had been "very much a collegiate affair".

■ **Nicholas Stuart is a Canberra writer.**