

Establishing an Effective Offshore Safety Committee

- by Mikey Craig (15-20 minutes)

'Play Your Part' Workforce Involvement Day, Murrayfield – 8th May 2008

Good afternoon,

I am Mikey Craig, I work as a Radio Operator for Transocean on the drilling rig *Paul B Loyd Jr.* - contracted to BP, and I've been working in the North Sea since I was a teenager. I am very much what you might call a 'people person'. Over the years I have developed a passion for health & safety, and I've served four full terms as an elected safety representative.

Like many of us who were offshore at the time, the seeds of that passion for safety were sown on the night of the 6 July 1988. I had not long begun my offshore career and my lack of confidence, borne of inexperience, appreciated the relative quiet that a nightshift in the Radio Room would bring. I had little to do during my 12 hours on other than prepare the reports that would be sent by telex the following morning, arrange the odd ship-shore call home for a fellow crew member, and observe the 3-minute silence periods on the international calling and distress radio frequency of 2182 KHz.

These 3-minute silence periods, commencing every hour and half hour throughout the day and night, were allocated as such so that ships in distress with weak signals, could be better received above the usual buzz of traffic that would otherwise be heard coming from the various stations transmitting within a radius that spanned hundreds of miles at night. This rule was strictly observed and policed by all in 'radio land' - to carelessly transmit, or

inadvertently tune up your set during these times would immediately bring chastisement from a more diligent operator, or the station staff at one of the Radio Coast Stations dotted around the UK.

Like all those before it that evening, the commencement of the 3-minute watch at 10pm was duly respected, and all that could be heard was the usual high frequency hiss and occasional electrostatic crackle that was common by that time of night. Two minutes of the period passed before the relative silence was broken by the screech of an HF radio, tuning up over the emergency frequency, and I remember thinking to myself *“that guy’s gonna get it”*. Unfortunately however, the tune up was no blunder, and was followed by a concerned transmission to Wick Radio from the Master of the Lowland Cavalier, broadcasting news of the first explosion on Piper Alpha. Thereafter, the radio operator on the Piper was heard sending a series of alarmed Mayday messages, and the whole horror of the disaster began to unfold.

It was a long and harrowing night, and in the morning, the magnitude of what had passed was becoming ever clearer. Despite an armada of vessels searching the area, there wasn’t going to be any more survivors. The death toll was enormous, the burns and injuries of the survivors were horrendous. I knew I wouldn’t sleep, but I still I lay in my bunk thereafter. Numbed by the events from the previous watch, the transmissions on the emergency channel still milling around in my head. I reflected on the panicked messages from the R/O, bound by his duty to send the mayday - I felt a deep empathy with his position. I dearly wished he had managed to escape the confines of what I

pictured the Radio Room to be. I wondered if he was one of the 'lucky ones'- as few as they were. I considered what I would do in the same situation, and how I might try and escape; then the very stark reality that I had chosen a very dangerous industry to work in hit me hard. I felt scared.

This fear was further compounded 10 weeks later when Timothy Williams, a fellow Radio Operator, was killed when my sister rig *Ocean Odyssey* blew up. He was ordered out of the lifeboat back to the Radio Room by the OIM to continue communications, who thereafter ordered an evacuation of the rig, and left him to die.

My training and expected duty in a major event was no longer an exercise, it was real, and so were the consequences. In retrospect, those early years, particularly during periods of sleep, were fraught with moments of terror, as sudden loud bangs and violent shuddering, common on rigs constructed of steel, would make my adrenalin rush in preparation for an event.

Nonetheless, I reasoned that I needed the wages, and would have to stick it out, but made a promise to myself that if I was ever in a dodgy situation, I would look after myself and my shipmates as best I could.

In respect of Tim, the 167, and the hundreds more, before and since, it's an honour for me to be up here today to give you a presentation on the importance of establishing an effective Safety Committee.

Some of you may be surprised to learn that there was in fact a safety committee on Piper Alpha the night it exploded, but it was a committee in name only. Being comprised exclusively of oil company staff, the bulk of the

workforce made up of contractors' employees were unrepresented. Without training, and in the absence of effective regulations to protect and empower them, and without an effective enforcement agency in place at the time, the committee was ineffective. Indeed, many reps had resigned in protest.

Despite serious concerns from the workforce about safety on Piper Alpha with its history of fire, explosion and industrial death, no effective mechanism existed for the workforce to address the serious issues that eventually caused the disaster. This, combined with the corporate greed of a company that paid only lip service to safety, made catastrophe certain.

I firmly believe that if Piper Alpha had had in place the elements to support an active and functioning safety committee, such as those that exist on my rig today, then the disaster may have been averted. I know we still have a considerable way to go in drilling, but on my rig at least, I am conscious of a continual and progressive step-change towards better workforce involvement in safety over recent years.

Our committee on *Paul B Loyd Jr.* is comprised of enthusiastic reps, supported and encouraged by both Transocean and BP management. This not only applies to rig management, but also to senior management ashore. On their rig visits, they make a point of meeting with us, taking ashore with them any workforce concerns, and communicating back any progress to the committee. The 'open door policy' onboard PBLJ, really is just that. We don't need to wait till the next committee meeting in order to raise issues with

management. Reps are encouraged to approach management informally, and the evidence is that workforce concerns are acted upon in good time, and any resources required are usually provided.

Although we are essentially worker representatives, our management realise that our safety committee is an invaluable tool in their aim to reduce accidents and incidents. All those experienced eyes and receptive ears are very much an early warning system for issues that might cause problems later down the line. This transparency and communication between workforce and management is a vital starting point for developing the safety culture that a safety committee needs in order to function and flourish.

Of equal importance is the pro-activity and performance of the reps themselves. No worker should consider standing for election as a rep unless they are genuinely interested in representing those who elected them in the first place. Remember that safety reps are first and foremost worker representatives and not, as is sometimes perceived, assistant safety officers. Reps must be prepared to put in a bit of effort on constituents' behalf. I have found that people stand for the role of safety rep for all sorts of reasons, but for me, the best reps are those that genuinely try to make a difference to the health and safety of their fellow workers. This ethos sits at the very heart of our committee and is continually reinforced.

Our experienced reps play a big part in mentoring the newly elected, and this is excellent for building cohesion within the committee. That cohesion develops confidence within the reps themselves, knowing that there is

experience around the table and strength in numbers if needed.

The statutory SI971 committee must meet periodically to discuss and record the issues and concerns that come directly from the constituencies. In order to share experience and plan a sensible joint approach, the safety reps on our rig have additional non-statutory meetings. We meet like this at least once per week, or more frequently if issues dictate. Each rep takes a turn as chairman, another records the minutes, further developing communication skills and building confidence among the less experienced reps. We have a comprehensive structure of constituencies that represents fairly the entire workforce onboard. This ensures the best chance that there will be an experienced member of the crew or, if you like, an 'area expert' to deal with issues that are specific to any particular issue or concern.

As an example lets say there is an issue with a lifting operation. A rep from the deck constituency can provide expertise with respect to the problem, and hopefully a good knowledge of the associated regulation in LOLER. If he or she does not yet understand the SI971 regulations then coaching will come from committee colleagues. By the end of a term in office all reps will step down or stand again for re-election with a far more comprehensive understanding of offshore hazards and the associated regulation than they had when they started.

As a committee I would say we are a fairly pro-active bunch and recently we have used the venue of our informal weekly meetings to plan in more detail

the inspections that directly relate to issues brought to us by our constituents. We also try and participate on a larger scale with a specific safety project each quarter that we feel will be topical amongst the workforce. For example, following complaints from the workforce during a recent extensive painting and blasting programme of the accommodation block, we embarked upon a project of investigating the sources of excessive noise that was disrupting the sleep of our crews. Together with the support of management, I feel we have had made significant progress in mitigating the problem of noise, which is very common on drilling rigs.

Now certain periods, immediately before and after shift change, are allocated as such to allow operations with excessive noise to be carried out around the accommodation — an example of management and the workforce working together to improve safety as intended by the SI971 provisions. The crews get a decent night's sleep, and the following day they don't take the hazard of fatigue to their worksites. Embarking on projects such as this, which directly improve the day-to-day lives of our constituents, demonstrates credibly that the committee is doing its best on their behalf. The importance of this cannot be overstated.

Whilst out on inspections we are easily identified by our blue hats. The workforce appreciates seeing us going about in a group. It's on these inspections and tours that problems are often brought to our attention. The sight of a group of reps on an inspection can jog the memory of a fellow worker who has an issue that they perhaps meant to raise previously. The visibility of reps at the worksite and the safety improvements we deliver further

demonstrates to the crews that the system has value and can encourage crew members to consider standing for election. The committee then has a means of perpetuating itself by bringing in new reps when others have served their term.

However, no matter how keen a rep may be to make a difference, or how cohesive and hard working a committee is, the effectiveness of the safety reps will depend entirely upon the level of training he or she receive — a fact recognised by the HSE in the guidance for SI971. We are very fortunate on my rig that reps are provided with excellent support with respect to training from both Transocean and BP management in order to perform our function effectively. This is particularly the case with the support that we receive from BP with follow-up training. This is augmented by continuous and invaluable support, training and advice that I receive from the offshore workers union OILC.

BP in particular have long recognised the importance of having effective safety reps and committees, and a development programme that provides training up to Nebosh General Certificate level is available for reps that are prepared to learn and put some extra effort in. It's also worth noting that BP have in place a *Safety Reps Charter*, which states that (with respect to training) elected reps contracted to BP operations will be treated with parity to their own directly employed people. BP offshore management can be invited to sign the Charter by a safety committee that sits within any of their operations, and budget accordingly to finance the pledge.

BP also provides a forum for safety reps, both those who are directly employed and contractors' employees, to meet together and share common issues as well to learn about best practices from their various operations. It was through this network that we received the support of fellow reps on BP production platforms that brought about the developmental training for reps on PBLJ. Although I admit we are not perfect, I'm sure that without this support and training our committee would be nowhere near the stage of development that we are today. Networking between installations is invaluable in aiding the development of safety committees and this practice should be strongly encouraged within other offshore companies.

Unfortunately however, not every rep works on a BP contract. The vast majority of reps, particularly those employed by contractors and drilling companies, will generally receive nothing more than the cursory 5-day basic course, despite the HSE SI971 guidance recommending that developmental training should be provided as a follow up to the basic course.

Too many Duty Holders prefer 'compliance by prescription' dishing up only the bare minimum to keep the regulator of their back. Bearing in mind this refusal of a great many duty holders to provide the recommended developmental training I would have thought that the basic 5-day standard would have been 'beefed up' to compensate. But quite the opposite has recently happened. The OPITO 5-day training standard was '*dumbed down*' by removing the two and a half hour module designed to explain the principle of *so far as is reasonably practicable*.

This change was affected behind closed doors and the explanation given for the removal of this key training element is that safety reps – a great number of you out there, and I – find the subject matter “too difficult”! This patronising and insulting assessment is very much misplaced. Offshore safety reps want the knowledge and are perfectly capable of grasping its meaning. A credible OPITO SI971 training standard is essential and apparently not in place at the present time.

The SI971 Safety Committees has among their functions the responsibility to keep safety rep training under review. This issue is also a current work stream of the Workforce Involvement Group at OIAC, onto which I, and other safety reps, have recently been co-opted. It is the intention to see satisfactory movement on the quality and scope of safety representative training. As an absolute minimum, offshore safety reps should surely be entitled to training at least on a par with onshore reps, which is presently not the case.

Then there is the ugly spectre of NRB leading to contractors’ employees, *including safety reps*, being sacked or transferred to other installation to ‘shut them up’ when managers think they are too keen in raising safety issues. How on earth are we ever to progress with workforce involvement in this sort of climate? Yes it is true that the practice is nowadays rare and only exists in pockets. But the message it sends goes right across the industry and definitely stops people speaking out on legitimate concerns, and does nothing to encourage members of the workforce to stand for election as safety rep.

I think the HSE despite limited resources are becoming much better at addressing the issue of workforce involvement offshore. Inspectors are now seen again going about their inspections in tandem with safety reps. The recently formed (as opposed to the previous) Workforce Involvement Group is thriving and does represent the workforce having safety reps as well as the HSE on board. Indeed, today's conference is an initiative on the part of the Workforce Involvement Group, and the efforts of Julie Voce and her team in raising the profile of workforce involvement in safety, is to be commended.

The HSE are just one part of it though. It is my firm belief that if we are going to fulfil our industry's vision of being the safest oil producing region in the world, *ever*, let alone by 2010, then much more, and much better workforce involvement in safety is required by the entire offshore community. Better developing offshore safety committees and further improving training for safety reps are crucial to achieving that goal.

We need to remind ourselves just why that point cannot be overstated.

Look around the room at all these people.

This is just about the number of offshore workers killed in one night nearly 20 years ago. Earlier today, you saw a film on the Piper Alpha disaster. As

poignant as it was, it did not convey the human element that surrounded the disaster, it did not tell you of the terror and suffering that took place that night, which we later learned from the survivors.

I challenge anyone who has not yet read the testimonies of those survivors to do so. If you do, you will learn of an incredible struggle to survive, where men were so desperate that they wrapped their burning heads in towels that they had dipped into the mess room aquarium, and poured sticky blackcurrant juice over their faces in a vain attempt to keep cool - while they waited to be rescued by helicopter, a helicopter that could never come. You will read of men that found themselves trapped inside a food container, and were so desperate that they squeezed the juice from tomatoes over their blistered skin and down their parched throats for some respite. You will read of the member of the drill crew, (typically very tough characters) that wanted to hold the hand of friend in order that he didn't die alone.

You will learn of incredible acts of humanity, where brave individuals gave their lives in order to try and save others; but mostly, you will read of tragic, avoidable, loss of life.

And finally, let's put things in perspective here; these men didn't go to war...

They went to their work.

It's been incredibly difficult for me to write and present this. I'm not the most

comfortable of persons in front of a large audience. But if just one of you can take something from anything that I have said, if I can ignite a spark of passion in any of you reps that will make you work a bit harder to make a difference, but more hopefully, if someone in this room with influence in this industry, decides to act and make safety committees and reps more effective, then it will have been worth it.

Thank you.