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## **Workforce Engagement : Are we Learning? – Mikey Craig**

PIPER25 Presentation – Aberdeen Exhibition & Conference Centre – 19<sup>th</sup> June 2013

22 minutes.

That's all the time it took to lose control on Piper Alpha, and escalate a miscommunication at shift handover into the worst offshore oil disaster, in world history.

The preceding video [Remembering Piper] asked – “*where were you?*” - during those 22 minutes. I know some of you in attendance this morning, were on board Piper Alpha that night, and I'm sure I speak for everyone when I respectfully acknowledge your presence with us here today, to reflect, review, reinforce & re-energise.

Some of you might also have been working offshore that night on other installations, although it's increasingly more likely that you hadn't yet started your career, and some of you wouldn't even have been blessed with gift of life yet, that was so cruelly taken from so many, on the night of the 6th July 1988.

Like all other Radio Operators working the night shift on the many North Sea installations that night, I remember where I was. I'd not long begun my offshore career and my lack of confidence appreciated the relative quiet that a nightshift in the Radio Room would normally bring. I'd little to do during my 12 hour shift 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.

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 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 couple of alarmed Mayday messages, and the whole horror of the disaster began to unfold.



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It was a long and harrowing night, and by morning, the magnitude of what had just 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, and the burns and injuries sustained by some of the survivors were horrendous.

Although I couldn't sleep, I still 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 and felt a deep empathy with his position. I dearly wished he had managed to escape the confines of what I imagined 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, and a very stark reality hit me hard; I had chosen a very dangerous industry to work in.

In respect of the 167, and the hundreds more, before and since, it's an honour for me to be up here today to talk about the importance of workforce involvement in safety – I'm particularly keen to address the safety reps amongst you, in the hope that I can encourage some of you to become more effective within your function.

There's no doubt we've come a long way since Piper, and the turnaround in our safety performance is notable. We've certainly become much better at managing the risk associated with the hazards that we faced 25 years ago, which are the very same hazards we still face today. Multiple £billions have been invested to upgrade infrastructure, preventative barriers and mitigating measures, but to quote the late Bob Ballantyne, a Piper survivor who tirelessly campaigned for safety improvements offshore, *"This raises the question – just what sort of condition were these platforms in that this kind of money had to be spent"*.

Today we can measure the value of that money spent by the remarkable reduction in incidents and accidents since the 1980's, but the fact is our safety performance has flat lined and offshore workers are still getting hurt. We still have potential for major events particularly with the unplanned release of hydrocarbons, therefore more still needs to be done.

We all know that it was an unplanned release of hydrocarbons that led to the Piper Alpha disaster, but that wasn't the cause. The cause lay much deeper - rooted within the safety culture of the industry at the time. The real challenge sitting at the very thin end of the wedge for us now is our continued development in this area.

Workforce involvement, or engagement, call it what you will, just may be the key to us further improving our safety performance. Traditionally it has been the role of management to manage safety offshore, but I truly believe that if everyone offshore feels that they can actively participate with managing and improving their own safety then we will see that trend moving south again. A



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knowledgeable workforce empowered with their own safety management will have the confidence to challenge where necessary. That's what workforce engagement is all about.

We have seen some great successes in this development already offshore. Of all the improvements in safety culture since Piper, the empowerment given to the workforce to stop the job, I feel, is our greatest advancement yet. It certainly wasn't an option in 1988; so as an industry, it seems, we really *are* learning.

This is no 'easy-fix' though, there are real difficulties with understanding and managing the many factors that contribute towards, and restrict, the development of a safety culture. Our industry is a very complex one, and wherever human beings are involved there will also be complexities, but the more people we can get involved and switch on to safety, and not simply because we feel we have to, but because we believe it's the right thing to do, then it will become increasingly easier to reach a point where it's simply 'the way we do things' - *everywhere*.

We also have to be prepared for the long haul as the path that must be travelled in the development of a safety culture is a continuous one, and although milestones have already been reached we will always be required to reach more. It is cliché, but if our industry is to be measured as a whole then we will only ever be 'as strong as our weakest link', therefore *everyone* in *every* company - from the MD to the new hire Roustabout - needs to be encouraged to play their part.

This point wasn't missed by the great Lord Cullen in his report following the public enquiry into the Piper Alpha disaster when he said;

*"It is essential that the whole workforce is committed to and involved in safe operations. The first-line supervisors are a key link in achieving that as each is personally responsible for ensuring that all employees, whether the company's own, or contractors, are trained to and do work safely, and that they not only know how to perform their jobs safely but are convinced that they have a responsibility to do so"*

Lord Cullen also had a vision of workforce engagement with robust safety committees at the heart of the process when he stated, "*Possibly the most visible instrument for the involvement of the workforce is a safety committee system*". He also realised the importance of safety representation, when he noted;

*"The representation of the workforce in regard to safety matters is important not merely for what it achieves on installations, but also for the effect which it has on the workforce – in showing that their views are taken into account and that they are making a worthwhile contribution to their own safety"*



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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 them to address the serious issues that eventually caused the disaster. This, combined with 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 then the disaster may have been averted.

Before becoming involved full time in safety I am very proud to have previously been elected to serve 4 full terms as an offshore safety rep, and I worked very hard at developing my safety committees over those 8 years. I've seen first-hand the SI971 offshore safety committee system working to great effect. Those committees were comprised of enthusiastic reps that were very much supported and encouraged by my managers. This didn't only apply to rig management but also to senior management ashore. On their rig visits, they made a point of meeting with us, taking ashore with them any workforce concerns, and communicating back any progress to the committee in good time.

Although safety reps are essentially worker representatives, good managers will realise that an effective safety committee is an invaluable tool in our aim to continually improve our safety performance offshore, and they will do all they can to support the reps and ensure continued development of the committee. All those experienced eyes and receptive ears at the 'coal face', so to speak, 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, and sounds a lot like the workforce engagement initiative that is being promoted today.

However, even after 24 years of SI971, many safety committees simply are not functioning as they should, and I fear we are missing a fantastic opportunity to make progress in realising the vision of Cullen. I believe that some elements of the industry, for whatever reason, still cannot see any value in the system. Some duty holders, and safety reps, really need to try and do more.

You reps in attendance today are obviously committed to at least some degree and I know a great many of you will be sacrificing time with your families to be here, but how many do you know that are not as committed as you? So whilst a great deal of work is being applied by probably 10% of



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the safety reps in this industry, it's probably equally true that 10% of those elected will never ever do anything regardless of how hard we try and encourage them. It's the 80% in the middle that we really need to try and engage with now - the '*floating voters*' - if you like; those that would probably be happy to do more if they are given a little more guidance and the opportunity away from the worksite in order to attend to their function as is required by regulation 26 of the SI971 regulations.

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 our safety reps will depend entirely upon the level of training they receive and this is a fact recognised by the HSE in the guidance for SI971. I'm delighted that the reps of today are finally going to be given the opportunity to develop their skills through further training. Well done to my fellow colleagues on the Workforce Involvement Group of the Offshore Industry Advisory Committee and others for their efforts in achieving this. Duty holders should now give their committees every chance to develop and provide the resources required to make this training available. Equally, reps will need to make sure that they do not miss an opportunity to use these skills to better effect at the worksites.

Five years ago at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Piper disaster I stood up and addressed a large gathering of the offshore workforce. I did so in the hope that I might be able to ignite a spark of passion in some of those present, and encourage better workforce involvement with safety offshore. I've since learned that one of our colleagues in attendance that day, Willie Watt, did exactly that. He felt empowered enough to make a difference. Enough so that his efforts were deservedly recognized by industry when he was awarded Safety Rep of the Year in 2011. Is there another safety champion amongst you today? If you believe you can make a difference, *then you will!*

If you're already a safety rep, encourage others to stand if vacancies exist on your rig and work harder at developing your committee for the good of your rig. Enter into dialogue with Management in the spirit of co-operation and mutual respect. Hold safety conversations at the worksites, and never ever walk by an unsafe condition or unsafe act. Probably the biggest thing we can all do to help each other keep going home to our families every trip is to perform those interventions where necessary.

Learn more about the major hazards we face on a daily basis and develop a better understanding of your installation's safety case. Put forward a solid case to management to attend the additional training modules that are now available. Please, just get more involved with safety in any way you can.



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In the following session Dr Gillian Simpson of Step Change will also ask you to get involved when she introduces you to the recently developed workforce engagement tool and I ask you all to give her your fullest support in participating.

Let's remind ourselves exactly why workforce engagement in safety is so important.

Before I stood in front of you today you saw an excellent and respectful production by Step Change, which has been developed to encourage us all to play our part offshore and remind us of the sacrifice given by the men of Piper Alpha. As poignant as it was, it did not fully convey the human element that surrounded the disaster. It did not tell you of the terror and suffering that must have taken 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 from the burning heat.

You will read of the member of the drill crew (typically very tough characters) that wanted to hold the hand of a 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 into perspective here; those men didn't go to war...

They went to their work.

Everything *you* have in terms of safety offshore today, including the added peace and security *your* family enjoys whilst you are offshore, is owed to the men of Piper Alpha, and the hundreds more ordinary offshore workers, just like *you*, that paid the ultimate price for *your* safety.

All of us must never forget their sacrifice. All of us here today, from the Managing Directors to new hire Roustabouts, must go back to our workplaces and do all we possibly can to prevent it ever happening again.

Please, play your part.

Thank you.