

The Washington Post

Gulf accident reports paint an image of confusion, stress and danger on rigs

Monday, August 9, 2010

By Carol D. Leonnig and Marc Kaufman
Washington Post Staff Writers

After a 10-hour ride over choppy seas, a crew of welders from Frank's Casing Crews arrived just before midnight at a Hercules Offshore oil rig in the waters off Galveston, Tex. The eight men were briefed on the rig evacuation plans and assigned bunks, where they slept for two or three hours before being awakened for work.

They were at their job to cut a 60-inch hole in a thick piece of metal well before dawn. A safety and planning meeting was held about 5 a.m. but, according to an investigation by the Minerals Management Service, none of the men from Frank's were in attendance.

Confusion reigned for the next two hours: At one point, a Hercules worker told the men to stop cutting; at another, a man from Frank's left the site to tell the rig crew that he feared the metal slab they were cutting would break loose and they would fall to their deaths. He returned to his work just in time to watch as the metal gave way and a co-worker, unable to regain his balance, fell 50 feet to a deck below, and then into the gulf. At 10 a.m., the report said, the man was declared dead.

On more than 4,000 platforms and exploration rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, workers are asked daily to do very arduous work under difficult conditions -- often with little sleep, limited instructions and sometimes inadequate training. In some cases, as happened in this 2008 death, the company boss commands workers to do something they warn is dangerous.

According to scores of accident reports and panel investigations by the MMS in recent years, the stressful and sometimes confusing working conditions played a significant role in the accidents and deaths that have occurred in the gulf. In the past two years, federal rig inspectors have warned their bosses of a looming safety crisis because of workers' minimal training. But little changed.

Factories out at sea, the drilling rigs and platforms operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and are among the more dangerous places in the country to work. In a 2008 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report, the agency reported that the overall fatality rate for workers in the oil and gas extraction industry was "approximately seven times the rate for all workers" between 2003 and 2006, with many deaths caused by accidents involving machinery and pipes, and overexertion. Injury rates, which are more complex and controversial, were not included in the report.

Statistics from the Minerals Management Service, now renamed the Bureau of Ocean Energy (BOE), show that 1,298 accidents on rigs and platforms were reported from 2006 through 2009 in the gulf, as well as 30 deaths. The accident statistics are significantly higher than in the five years before 2006, when a new definition of "accident" went into effect. In the five years before 2006, MMS logged a total of 252 gulf accidents and 30 deaths.

"It's clear to me there are a number of things that can be done to enhance safety," the new BOE director, Michael Bromwich, said in an interview. The accident reports tell him the industry's safety program "wasn't as strong as it should have been."

At many sites, company spokesmen say, safety is a top priority and workers get detailed training. For instance, Noble Corp. spokesman John Breed said that its crews are instructed for six months on the rigs before they're ready for work. He said the jobs are highly paid and in great demand. Some regulators fear, however, that the federally-required training is bare-bones, and had pushed in recent years for the power to audit company training plans.

On many rigs, with the weather often harsh, the work dangerous and the shifts sometimes lasting up to 12 hours and more -- accidents are a constant worry. Many believe the actual number is considerably higher than reported.

Frank Spagnoletti, a Houston lawyer who has represented many rig workers, said clients were often injured in accidents that either the rig operator chose not to report to regulators or that MMS inspectors knew about but decided not to investigate. Spagnoletti said that the chumminess of the regulators with industry operators is well known on the Gulf Coast, and that the agency's tepid accident reports and rare, meager fines leave workers unprotected.

Gary Arsenault, a Louisiana personal injury lawyer who has sued oil companies on behalf of workers, said the most common rig denizen is a burly high school dropout.

"They're hiring these guys for their bodies, and when they get hurt, the company throws them away," Arsenault said.

"You have a bunch of people out there who are green and don't know what they're doing. They're working 12 on and 12 off, sometimes 18s, sometimes 24s. Accidents happen, and it's the ultimately the all-mighty dollar that drives it all."

One of his clients was Garold Bates, a contractor who was injured in January 2004. He had been sent to an Energy Partners oil rig platform to unload supplies but found crashing waves were ramming his boat up against the platform pilings like a toy. A co-worker warned the company foreman back on the coast by radio that unloading the supplies was not a good idea because of the rough seas. The foreman ordered the pair to "go ahead and put it on there." Bates's leg was crushed between the platform and the boat, requiring emergency medical treatment and subsequent therapy for his injuries.

"The man that told [us] to do it, he wasn't there," Bates said in his deposition. "There probably wasn't any seas kicking up where he was at on the land."

The incident was never reported to the MMS; an Energy Partners spokesperson said it is not necessary to report incidents that are initially classified as a "first aid" problem. Lawyers said companies often avoid reporting accidents to win bonuses and future work with clean safety records. Bates's injury lawsuit ended with a judge mediating a settlement in which the company paid Bates an undisclosed sum and admitted no fault.

Lee Hunt, director of the International Association of Drilling Contractors, called this view of rigs as unsafe and exploitative "a total fabrication, a kind of dream scenario for an injury lawyer."

"Crews offshore are well fed, well housed, well paid, and very proud to be working the rigs," he said. "These are incredibly well-trained crews, and to say they're treated so badly is terribly offensive."

As the rigs become increasingly sophisticated and computer-guided, he said, the need for well-educated, experienced and highly paid professionals has grown. An entry-level roustabout or maintenance worker will make \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year, and professionals substantially more.

A former senior agency supervisor said that in 2007 and 2008, a handful of senior managers in the agency pushed the MMS Office of Safety Management to automatically fine operators when a worker was killed in an accident on its rigs or platforms. But "that ran right into the culture, a lot of opposition," said the supervisor, who was familiar with the effort.

"It was like pushing Jello uphill."

The issue of worker safety is playing a role in the follow-up to the BP Deepwater Horizon blowout. Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) championed a bill that would prevent companies from firing employees who report safety violations and allows whistleblowers to appeal perceived retaliation to the secretary of labor.

"We have heard that the workers aboard the [Deepwater Horizon] rig had safety concerns, but in the end they were powerless to stop the cascading string of bad decisions by BP that led to the disaster," Markey said during debate. The bill passed the House by a vote of 315-93 and was incorporated into a larger energy bill that passed the House on a far closer vote.

The legislation, however, stalled in the Senate.

Staff writer Juliet Eilperin and researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this story.