



Media Release

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For Immediate Release

Time to remember world's worst oil disaster, Piper Alpha

As we reach the twentieth anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster where 167 offshore workers lost their lives in a major oil and gas facility fire in the North Sea it is time to reflect and remember.

“We owe it to the memory of all of those who lost their lives or suffered as a result of Piper Alpha to do our best to reduce the possibility of such an incident ever happening again,” said the CEO of Australia’s National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority (NOPSA), John Clegg.

“I am concerned the lessons are being forgotten and new engineers are unaware of the tragedy. Everyone in the industry must continually strive to ensure that they fully contribute to the effective control and management of major hazards offshore and to a safe working environment,” he said.

Piper Alpha still ranks as the world’s worst offshore oil disaster in terms of lives lost and impact to industry.

Frank Murray, now an occupational health and safety (OHS) inspector with NOPSA, and based in Perth, was the first British Department of Energy (DoE) inspector called out in the middle of the night to respond to the disaster which unfolded on July 6, 1988.

He was taken by helicopter to the semi submersible vessel ‘SSV Tharos’ which had been unable to get close enough to the Piper Alpha facility to carry out rescue work as the facility had turned into a massive inferno generating incredible radiant heat with tons of molten steel dropping into the sea with flames and smoke hundreds of metres high.

“Within about two hours virtually the whole installation was burnt to the water line. Very few people escaped. The fires continued burning, however, and were eventually extinguished by a team led by famed firefighter, Red Adair”.

“I had never seen a disaster of this magnitude. No prior experience or training is able to prepare you for how you will behave or feel when you are faced with a disaster of this kind. The images and emotions of the event will remain with me for the rest of my life.”

The Cullen Report, a public enquiry into the cause of the disaster, made far-reaching safety recommendations which have been accepted by the offshore petroleum industry globally. These included the need to establish an independent offshore safety regulator, and the adoption of the safety case regime, where an operator’s commitments to reducing risks to a level that is as low as reasonably practicable are documented and then verified during inspections by the independent safety authority.

Call for industry scholarships

On this twentieth anniversary of Piper Alpha, NOPSA is supporting a call which has been made by one of the survivors of the disaster, Ed Punchard, who now lives in Perth, for industry to support scholarships in memory of those who lost their lives in the disaster. The proposal is for a 20th anniversary scholarship scheme where graduate students could apply for one of 167 individual scholarships each in the name of one of those who lost their lives on Piper Alpha. This would allow students to further their study or research in an area that contributes to the cause of offshore safety. The proposal is being launched in the UK but we hope industry in Australia will support it.

Frank Murray of NOPSA believes the proposal will put the emphasis on the future and will assist a new generation of young people who will be involved in the oil and gas industry.

“The scholarships will enable them to learn from the Piper disaster and put into effect their own safety innovations”.

“Industry support for these scholarships will keep the memory of those lost on Piper Alpha alive and make a positive contribution to enhancing future offshore safety”.

Ends.

Further information: NOPSA external affairs officer, Tel 08 6461 7058 Mob 0434565722

NOTE: In selected circumstances, Frank Murray may be available for interviews