

Piper Alpha 25 years on

25 years on, a wreck buoy is all that is visible of what in 1988 was the North Sea's largest and oldest platform.

Built in 1976 as an oil platform and subsequently converted to gas production, by the late 1980's Piper Alpha was producing 10 per cent of the North Sea's gas. Together with the Tartan and Claymore platforms, Piper Alpha was connected to the Flotta oil terminal in the Orkneys.

On the night of the disaster the – 6 July 1988 – the seas 200 kilometres south east of Aberdeen were turned into a scene of total devastation.

Of the 226 people on the platform, 165 died and two rescue workers perished.

The first blast occurred around 10pm due to a leaking gas valve and started a major fire in the oil separation module fed by the two other platforms, Tartan and Claymore. Because the platform was originally built for oil, the firewalls in the accommodation block could withstand fire, but not explosions.

Len McCluskey, Unite general secretary writes

Twenty-five years on from the Piper Alpha disaster, condolences and tributes are not enough. Each day 30,000 people earn their living on North Sea installations, working and living in a profoundly hostile environment. They deal with raw energy in a magnitude and a danger that is hard to comprehend, without them the lights would go out and the country would grind to halt.

One death because of a health and safety failure is a tragedy and one death because commercial gain is put before human life is a scandal. Corporations at home and abroad still have to learn the lessons of 25 years ago, which is why Unite is at the forefront in holding companies to account and we work across the industry to drive up health and safety standards.

We owe it to the 167 people who lost their lives, their families and those who live with that fateful night in the North Sea, the safest working conditions that can be obtained.

The Cullen inquiry

In November 1988, the Cullen inquiry was set up to establish what had caused the Piper Alpha disaster. **Lord Cullen** was scathing about Piper Alpha's permit to work system which he said was based on "informal and unsafe practice" and was knowingly and flagrantly flouted.

On the day of the disaster, the pressure safety valve on one of Piper Alpha's two large compressors was removed for an overhaul. At 6pm, with the job unfinished, the tube was temporarily sealed with a plate and the engineer completed a form stating that compressor A was not ready and should not be switched on.

At 9:45pm the platform's second compressor stopped and could not be restarted. Failing to find the paperwork on compressor A's safety valve because it was filed in a separate folder, operators restarted compressor A. The leaking gas found an ignition source and exploded.

Because divers had been working around the platform the fire water pumps had been switched to manual. As a result they did not start automatically as the disaster unfolded. Cullen found that even if they had, the deluge pipes were so clogged with scale that they would not have worked anyway.

Cullen was damning of Occidental who owned Piper Alpha saying that: "They were too easily satisfied that the permit to work system was

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being operated correctly, relying on the absence of any feedback of problems indicating that all was well."

He went on: "They failed to provide the training required to ensure that an effective permit to work system was operated in practice. In the face of a known problem with the deluge system they did not become personally involved in probing the extent of the problem and what should have been done to resolve it as soon as possible.

"They adopted a superficial attitude to the assessment of risk of major hazard. They failed to ensure that emergency training was provided as they intended. The safety policies and procedures were in place: the practice was deficient."

Occidental was found guilty of having inadequate maintenance and safety procedures, but no criminal charges were ever brought against it.

Has the industry learnt the lessons of Piper Alpha?

Following the disaster Lord Cullen made 106 recommendations, all of which were adopted by the government and the North Sea offshore industry. But

25 years on there are still questions over whether the global oil and chemical industry has fully learnt and understood the lessons of Piper Alpha.

More recently the Buncefield explosion and fire, and the BP Texas oil refinery and Deepwater Horizon disasters have raised concerns that process safety is being ignored or downgraded. Following the Deepwater Horizon disaster the chair of the US Chemical Safety Board, **Dr Moure-Eraso** said: "Officials on the Mocondo oil rig were in the process of lauding operators and workers for a low rate of personal injuries on the very day of the April 20, tragedy. Company VIPs had flown to the rig in part to commend the workforce for zero lost time incidents.

"This similarity to the BP Texas City explosion, which occurred on the day of a luncheon to celebrate low personal injury rates underscores the need for industry to examine process safety indicators to prevent future catastrophes."

A fresh analysis by Scottish academic **Professor Charles Woolfson** comparing the safety failures leading to the Piper Alpha disaster with the Deepwater Horizon disaster found that there were "startling and wholly depressing similarities" between the two. These included lax regulatory regimes, weak inspection and enforcement procedures, and prioritising commercial considerations over the safety of personnel and the environment.

He also noted that neither Occidental, the operator of Piper Alpha or BP were "rogue companies" operating outside industry standards at the time of the disasters saying: "Both companies were typical representatives of the industry of which they were part, an industry run by giant multinational organisations aggressively pursuing the bottom line in a ruthless competitive environment."

In the UK, Unite is working with the Process Safety Leadership Group, the Chemical and Downstream Oil Industry Forum and the National Skills Academy for the Process Industries to

develop standards. In Europe, thanks to Unite's work with other European unions, a draft EU directive has been improved so that it fits more closely with the current regulatory regime in the North Sea. The directive also explicitly maintains the health and safety rights of offshore workers.

But as Unite national officer **Linda McCulloch** explains: "Twenty-five years on from Piper Alpha it's evident that the industry still needs to learn the lessons, standing still is not an option. Cuts to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the merging of HSE's Offshore Safety Division with the HSE's mines inspectorate and gas and pipelines inspectorate is a real cause for concern too.

"Not only does it break some of the key recommendations of Cullen, there is a real fear that the restructuring will dilute the expertise that offshore safety inspectors have accumulated over the last 25 years. We owe it to those who have lost their lives and their families to have a properly resourced inspectorate backed up with a tough regulatory regime."

Unite's action plan for a safer oil and gas industry

- Stronger laws
- Tough inspection and enforcement
- Focus on process safety
- Involve the workforce and act on their warnings
- Only safe production
- Increased checks on ageing plant



