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## UK

# Piper Alpha pair 'wrongly blamed'



The Piper Alpha fire claimed the lives of 167 men



[Jane Franchi reports on new evidence about the Piper Alpha disaster](#)

Two men implicated in the chain of events which ended with the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster could have been wrongly blamed, according to a BBC television documentary.

Frontline Scotland, which will be shown on Tuesday night, questions the long-held view that the inferno in July 1988 - which claimed the lives of 167 men - was sparked by a single explosion caused by a gas leak.

It says there is evidence of an earlier, smaller blast on the platform.

### Fateful chain of events

Last year a civil action in Edinburgh blamed Bob Vernon, 51, and Terry Sutton, 28, for the chain of events which resulted in the explosion.



The heat on the Piper Alpha platform was intense

But the programme makers say that if there was an earlier explosion on a different part of the platform the fatal fireball could have started in a different way, absolving the pair, who both died in the tragedy.

The theory is supported by John Barr, who was supervising a diver 50 feet under water at the time of the explosion.

He told the programme makers he brought up the diver after feeling an explosion before 9.45pm.

Mr Barr said: "While you're running a diver you're very aware of the time. You have to record it accurately."

Several workers on the fire-fighting vessel Tharos, which was 500 metres from Piper Alpha, also recall an explosion before 10pm and a logbook from the vessel times it at 9.45pm.

### **Missing explosion**

Frank McFarlane, a painter on Tharos, told the programme: "I knew there was a fire between 9.40pm and 9.45pm" but he said he was told his evidence was not needed by the Cullen inquiry, which investigated the disaster.



Bob Vernon...not able to defend his reputation

Piper Alpha rigger Mike Bradley said: "At the inquiry I told them that the first explosion I heard would be at 9.45pm or 9.50pm.

"But the inquiry said the first explosion and fireball was at 10pm. So what's happened to my explosion?"

Sixteen of the 34 Piper Alpha survivors who gave evidence at the inquiry said they experienced the first blast

before 10pm.

Angus Kennedy, an engineer on the supply ship The Performer, said the first message they received indicated a "small but manageable fire" at least 20 minutes before the Mayday call.

### **Maintenance errors**

Last year's court case, brought by relatives of some of the victims, found Mr Sutton, a maintenance worker, at fault for failing to tighten a flange used to replace a safety valve on one of the pumps.

Mr Vernon was said to have restarted the pump, unaware the safety valve was not in place, which resulted in a build-up of gas against the flange and the eventual explosion.

But Piper Alpha control room operator Geoff Bollands said it was inconceivable Mr Vernon would have restarted the pump because the power had been switched off.

He said: "There's no way that Bob Vernon would have wanted to do the electrical connection himself."

Mr Sutton's widow, Margaret McAllister, told Frontline Scotland she wanted her late husband's name to be cleared and said: "It's a terrible thing to be carrying with you and a terrible thing I think for a dead man."

"His memory is tarnished with this."

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**Frontline Scotland will be shown in Scotland only at 9.30pm on BBC One.**

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