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Diver twice cheated death on Piper Alpha platform

A DIVER who twice cheated death on Piper Alpha yesterday relived the experience and told of his two-hour wait for evacuation from the platform after an explosion in 1984.

Mr Joseph Wells, an American, told the inquiry in Aberdeen that he would never return to the offshore oil industry as a result of his experiences. Mr Wells, 34, from Lompoc, California, was the last survivor to give evidence.

He said he was in a shelter on the diving platform when the first explosion ripped through Piper Alpha. "I felt scared. The hut was shaken violently and the platform was shaking."

Seconds after that explosion there was another and he saw "an expanding ball of flame underneath the platform". Then he saw oil leaking from the main oil line, which he described as coming out "in gallons rather than cupfulls".

Mr Wells, who gave evidence with his wife Hazel at his side, told how he tried in vain to launch a liferaft and then had to scramble down a knotted rope to be taken off by a fast rescue craft.

He also told of the horror of helping other injured survivors to board

the stand-by vessel Silver Pit. "The biggest problem was having to haul someone up 12ft out of the water with his whole skin peeling off his body and him screaming in pain," he said.

Mr Wells also told of his experience after the explosion on Piper Alpha in 1984 and claimed that few lessons had been learned. He told Mr Hugh Campbell, QC for the Piper Alpha trade union group, that it took at least two hours to evacuate the platform by helicopter.

No-one tried to launch the lifeboats on that occasion because of the severe weather and they waited in the helideck reception area in dense smoke. "I was sick for a couple of weeks because of smoke inhalation," he said.

He was asked by Mr Colin Campbell, advocate for the Piper Alpha disaster group, if the 1984 experience had shown up any deficiencies.

He replied: "It showed that explosions could happen and get out of control. It showed the men didn't have any training to deal with situations that were out of the ordinary as often happens in disasters.

It's looking back that really bothers, you can see inadequacies. I know standing around waiting for a helicopter for an hour-and-a-half breathing this heavy smoke . . ."

Mr Wells said that after the 1984 incident all breathing apparatus sets were made available on Piper Alpha. Asked if anything else was introduced, Mr Wells said: "I could not see any changes."

The inquiry is in recess until June 5.

