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Engineering expert tells of 88 oil and gas leaks on platform

THERE were 88 gas and oil leaks on the Piper Alpha platform in the nine years before the explosion in which 167 people died, the inquiry into the disaster heard yesterday.

This was revealed by Occidental engineering expert Mr Konrad Wottge who had been the sole witness until he completed his evidence after nine days yesterday.

The inquiry was also told yesterday how the police learned from the Glasgow Herald the location of the world's worst oil disaster.

A security guard from Occidental had alerted them that there was a major emergency offshore but did not know where or on what installation.

It took half an hour for them to confirm that Piper Alpha was involved.

Mr Wottge was referring to a document which he helped compile which showed that from August 1979 until the end of 1983 there were only 13 leaks but from then until late June last year there were 75 leaks.

"That is a totally invalid comparison because it was in 1983 we started logging all leaks, no matter how small," he said.

"Prior to that only significant leaks were logged."

He agreed that about three quarters of all the leaks came from valves,

flanges, or nipples. Seven or eight were as a result of corrosion or fatigue of pipework.

Mr Nigel Emslie, QC, representing contractors Ingersoll-Rand, listed a number of incidents which had been caused by corrosion or fatigue.

Mr Wottge said that Occidental had a thorough programme of inspecting pipework internally and externally aimed at determining any potential problems at an initial stage.

Earlier Mr Wottge's evidence focused on the possible ignition of materials on the Piper Alpha platform during flaring operations.

He referred to a supervisors meeting which was held on the Claymore platform in February 1987 and quoted from a minute of the meeting relating to the ignition of flammable material stored above the laboratory during a platform shutdown.

"This incident is embarrassing," he said. "Exactly the same problem occurred in January this year during shutdown."

Mr Wottge agreed with Mr Emslie that from time to time the flares were capable, in particular wind conditions, of setting fire to materials on the platform.

He was asked if he was aware that as late as September 1987 that there was on-going concern about the possible ignition of materials by the flares and he said: "When we are talking about ignition by the flares we are talking of items like oil soaked or solvent soaked rags which have a relatively low ignition temperature. Personnel are aware that if you heat up bottles there is an area of concern and I think it does

emphasise the safety consciousness of the personnel on board."

He referred to a minute of a production department safety meeting on Piper on September 13, 1987 and said there had been an inquiry at that meeting as to what could be done to protect gas bottles outwith their normal storage area when the flare was large and various people were concerned about this problem.

"There was always concern with reference to the flare on the platform," he said referring to platform reports from July 1 and 2 of last year.

Mr Wottge was asked why, like lifejackets, survival suits were not stored at different locations throughout the platform.

He replied that while a lifejacket would fit a large number of people, individuals selected survival suits to fit them when they went offshore. Later, in re-examination, Mr Alan Rodger, QC, Solicitor-General, asked if he was aware that on the Gulfaks A platform in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea survival suits were kept in cabinets which meant that the Norwegian state oil company Statoil found it possible to get people into survival suits which were kept beside the lifeboats.

"It may be different kinds of survival suits," said Mr Wottge. "All I know is that when I go offshore I get one to fit me."

The scene having been set for the inquiry which is expected to last nine months the first evidence of the tragedy came from Chief Inspector Ian Gordon, 43, Grampian Police Force Oil Liason Officer.

He had been at home on the night of July 6 when he got a call from

headquarters saying they had been contacted about 10.08pm by a security guard at Occidental's Aberdeen offices saying they had a major offshore emergency. Unfortunately the guard could not say where offshore or what installation was involved.

Shortly after that headquarters had received a call from the Glasgow Herald followed by another from the BBC asking if they could confirm reports of an explosion on Piper Alpha. They could not confirm this.

"Following the calls from the Glasgow Herald and the BBC we contacted the coastguards on our direct line but were advised at that time they were busy and would call us back within a few minutes," said Chief Inspector Gordon.

Nothing more had been heard from Occidental and although they continually tried to contact them the Occidental lines were always engaged.

Special teams of police were called in to deal with the incident by documenting calls, answering relatives' queries and passing on information as it became available. More than 170 officers were involved on the first day. A list of persons on board Piper Alpha was received from Occidental at 12.45am but it took a further two hours to get the names, which were company by company, in alphabetical order so calls could be handled more quickly.

Seven people on the list were discovered to have moved to the MSV Tharos before the explosion and Chief Inspector Gordon said this had cast doubts on the accuracy of the list as it was thought others might

have been on the Tharos or gone ashore.