

gas leak before the gas says occidental

By GEORGE MACDONALD
and GAVIN SMITH

Occidental executives last night discounted reports of gas leaks on their Piper Alpha platform in the days before the world's worst offshore disaster in which 166 men died.

The girlfriends of two of those killed claimed that their boyfriends had spoken of gas leaks on the platform in telephone calls ashore, as reported on Page Three. One referred to men wearing breathing apparatus on the installation.

Mr John Brading, Occidental's chief executive in the UK, said the conditions described in the reports would be extremely unusual.

"We have had no reports on shore of such events," Mr Brading told a news conference at their Aberdeen headquarters. "If there was gas on the platform on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday that would be an extremely unusual situation which would in the normal course of events be reported immediately to management onshore and they received no such reports."

Engineering vice-president, Mr Gene Grogan, explained that during routine maintenance work on the gas conservation system they insisted their men wore breathing apparatus when removing a section of pipe where there might be residual gas including hydrogen sulphide. "This, we think, may have been the origin of the stories of men donning breathing apparatus but it is a part of normal platform operations," said Mr Grogan. "This was going on for two days before the accident."

It was possible that the gas detection system in the gas conservation module had been switched off while the maintenance work was going on but in their operations they have had no bearing on the tragedy.

"We believe this because the gas conservation module had been removed from our area of concern about the origin of the incident which would be started in either a B module," said Mr Grogan.

Asked if there was any evidence that the gas detection system throughout the platform had activated the alarm system before the accident Mr Brading said he expected there would be a record of that but all the records

on the platform had been destroyed.

Nevertheless if anything had happened he expected the production superintendent on shore who stayed in close communication with offshore operations throughout the day would have known if that had happened.

Mr Grogan added that as far as they knew all operations were normal and nothing unusual happened. They believe the gas detection system on the platform was operational and they did not even know if it had been shut off in the gas conservation module during maintenance which would not have been unusual.

Asked if there was any way an escape of gas had not registered Mr Grogan said: "We have heard reports, and they are hearsay reports, that they did register."

Mr Brading said there was to be a major inquiry which would not be in Occidental's hands and perhaps that would be the proper forum for people who had these concerns, which he fully understood, to bring forward.

To a suggestion that Occidental had not taken as many precautions on Piper Alpha as they should have Mr Brading said: "I do not believe that will be the case when properly examined in a thorough and professional way."

"I believe when this examination of our performance and record is made it will be demonstrated that standards maintained by this company represent the highest standards of the industry."

The Occidental chiefs also dismissed comments by their former loss prevention manager, Mr Jack Donaldson that Piper Alpha was the most highly dangerous platform in the North Sea.

At a request from St Mary's Cathedral the Right Rev Marjorie MacLeod, Aberdeen, told relatives of the victims that North Sea safety standards must be maintained and bettered "no matter what the cost."

Judge chosen for inquiry

HIGH Court Judge Lord Cullen has been appointed by Energy Secretary Malcolm Macdonald to chair the public inquiry into the Piper Alpha explosion.

Identified at Dundee High School and both Edinburgh and St Andrews universities, Lord

"The enormity of the Piper Alpha oilrig disaster has sent shock waves well beyond our shores as I can personally testify having returned on Friday night from Lourdes in South France," said Bishop Conti.

"It has full impact here in Aberdeen and the North East of Scotland where 40% of the victims had their homes and where the UK shore base of their operations is largely located.

"We have been — and are — proud of their achievements. We mourn now their tragic deaths and the deaths of their colleagues along with members of the rescue parties."

"In the oil industry we have in the main avoided the pollution of the earth and a careless loss of life. I say 'we' but of course we owe their achievements to our geologists, chemists, engineers and those men of brawn and courage who are willing to work long hours in hard conditions in constant risk of their lives."

"They have worked for our benefit, drilling deep into the ocean bed for the black gold and its attendant gases which provide us with fuel and energy, adding immeasurably to the quality of our lives."

"The responsibility for their deaths lies with an all — not with God — for we are ready to allow them to deal with potent natural forces, to play the master with wild, untamed, physical powers, which for the most part they have been able to harness."

"As a community we must see that the high standards of safety adopted by the oil companies are maintained and even bettered, so that no accidental risks are taken, whatever the cost."

Among the signatories were Mr Gene Grogan, Occidental's vice-president of engineering and Mr Ian Wood, head of Aberdeen, on Page 3.

Leader comment — Page 8

Profile — Page 3

Cullen, 53, has been a Judge since 1986. He was called to the Bar in 1960, and was an Advocate-Depute between 1976 and 1981 and chairman of the Medical Appeal Tribunal from 1977 until 1986.



Fred Adair aboard the Tharos; his task is blocked by tons of debris.

Slow going for the firefighters

RED ADAIR and his two fire-fighting colleagues face a slow, difficult, physically exhausting and dangerous battle to cap the burning wells on Piper Alpha.

Yesterday the weather 120 miles off Aberdeen added to their problems, and eventually forced them to abandon efforts to clear the tons of debris barring their way.

Guided by Adair, the most experienced oil fire-fighter in the world, Raymond Henry and Brian Krause have made more than a dozen trips from the MSV Tharos to the slippery oil covered deck of Piper Alpha, which is listing at 45 degrees.

They are lowered by crane in a basket to the platform.

Water is being continually hosed over the platform to keep it cool, but it has also extinguished some of the well fires allowing oil to flow into the sea. The bad weather, while delaying the capping operation, helped disperse what Occidental described as a "small slick" yesterday morning.

Mr Gene Grogan, Occidental's vice-president of engineering, said there were two methods of gaining control of the wells. One was mechanically, from the surface, but if the dangers proved too great the other was to drill a relief well. The latter could take at least a month.

The drilling vessel Kingsnorth

UK is on her way to the Piper field in case a relief well has to be drilled.

Mr Grogan said there were bits of burned and twisted metal of all types on the platform, preventing the Adair team from seeing several wells.

They were "tackling the bits on top just like you would clear out your garage". So far about 30% of the debris had been removed.

When this task was complete the next job would be to get hoses or lines attached to the wells. Cement would then be pumped down to plug the wells, or special fluid or seawater pumped down to kill the well.

The operation would be easier on those wells which still had their "Christmas tree" valves attached, but for those that did not special valves would have to be made.

Describing the conditions facing the fire-fighters, Mr Grogan said that some of the debris weighed several tons and they had to cope with the hazards of lead, smoke, and a slippery deck.

The debris was being lifted aboard the Tharos before being taken ashore for examination.

Most of the east side of the module had been cleared, but on the west side, which they have still to tackle, a well fire flared up on Saturday night and is still burning.

Mr Adair said they were climbing up the upper deck so they could look below to see the condition of the wells.

"It appears there are three or four wells that are burning pretty good," he said.

It was a different situation from most he had found himself in, because with half the platform gone it was difficult to get in to work.

"With the deck at a 45 degree angle and real slick, we are having to use ropes to let ourselves down and back and forth. But everything is going good," he said.

Asked if he had a sense of relief in working on a platform where there were still bodies trapped, Mr Adair said: "It's just part of the work you have to do and you learn to live with those things. It is a bad situation but you learn to do it."

He had not seen it in many safety-conscious people as there were out at Piper, and as far as he knew they had never had an accident before it was "just one of these things that happened."

"You can do some praying for us and pray to keep a good wind," he said. "That is what is going to help us more than anything — a good wind."