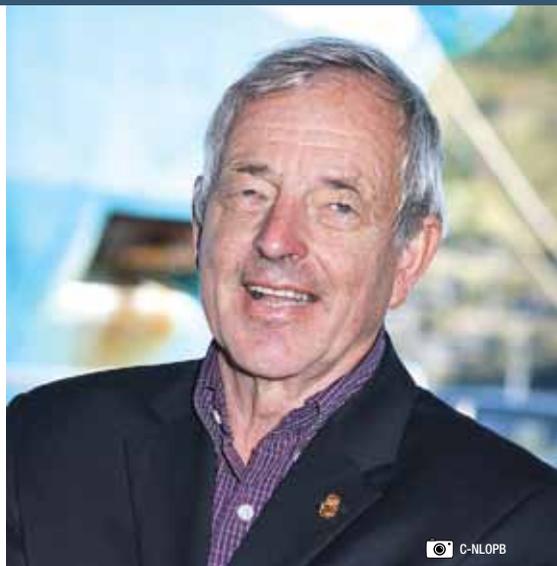


Safety makes all the difference

In my 30+ years working offshore, it has always been evident to me that safety makes all the difference between a disaster and a job well done. The sea is not kind to risk takers. Case in point:

In 1982 my company, Hydrospace Marine Services, bid on a contract to salvage the drill rig *Ocean Ranger*. The scope of work was to refloat the rig, bring her to the surface, transport it to deep water and sink it there. However, we weren't successful in the bid, which was won by Wijismuller, a very well-known Dutch firm. When I found this out, I called the Wijismuller project manager, told him who I was, described our previous work on the *Ocean Ranger* and offered our services as a diving subcontractor. They declined my offer. So early summer 1983, they arrived on the scene and in the first week on the job two of their divers were killed using a tool that was invented by the British as a submarine rescue tool. This particular tool, known as a Cox Gun, fired a hollow steel bolt with a conical tip through a steel plate. Once the bolt was through the plate, the tip could be unscrewed and air pumped through the bolt. The tool was designed to supply air to submariners who were trapped on the bottom. Wijismuller planned to use it to pump air into the ballast tanks as part of the process to refloat the rig. However, when the Wijismuller divers fired the gun into the first ballast tank of the *Ocean Ranger*, it triggered an explosion which killed the two divers. Obviously there was some kind of explosive mixture inside. The summer before we had been asked to use a similar gun during our underwater survey for the Royal Commission investigation of the sinking. The idea was to punch a hole in the ballast tank, then measure the time it took for the air to escape. By knowing the size of the hole, it could be determined how much air (and by inference, water) was in the tank. I refused to use the bolt gun, my explanation being that there were 16 tanks in each pontoon and while the tank in question should contain only ballast water and air, we knew that valves had been opening and closing of their own accord (speculated as being one of the main reasons for the sinking) and as far as I was concerned no matter what the tank was supposed to contain there could be diesel fuel in any of them. Therefore I felt that it would not be safe to carry out the operation with that particular tool. Obviously Wijismuller thought differently.

This is but one of many experiences over the past 30 years where safety has played a critical role in spelling the difference between success and failure. In the end, that phone call to a mother or father telling them that their child will not be coming home is to be avoided at all costs.



Max Ruelokke, P.Eng., is chairman and CEO of the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board.