

Into the Lion's mouth: the story of the Wildrake diving accident

By Michael Smart

Published by Lion's Mouth Publishing

Paperback edition, 2011
ISBN 978 0615 52838 0
445 pages

Just about everybody in the diving industry (and many others) who were around in the 1970s and 1980s will be familiar with the devastatingly tragic *Wildrake* diving accident. It took the lives of two young American professional divers, Richard 'Dick' Walker and Victor 'Skip' Guiel.

It happened when the early development of the North Sea oil and gas industry was going through its worst period of accidents. This particular accident sadly exemplified the lowest levels of greed, corruption and incompetence reached by the offshore diving industry in the North Sea.

It is important to emphasise that it was not the norm; it was a worst case scenario. Equally, it must be appreciated that the North Sea has since changed fundamentally and is now the most popular and safest place to work among offshore divers. It is undisputedly where the safety standards are currently the highest in the world.

Into the Lion's Mouth by former saturation diver Michael Smart is a significant publication. It gives

a detailed review of the lead-up to the accident, a blow-by-blow account of the accident as it unfolded and, finally, the indescribably incompetent rescue effort.

The book provides an invaluable lesson in how things should not be done, and is a key educational book in that sense. Hopefully, professionals in the industry, at all levels, will be able to use the lessons learnt to help them identify any tendencies in poor practice early on and therefore take corrective action. Otherwise, they risk falling into the same trap, or incident pit, that happened on the *Wildrake*.

The author is to be commended for the thoroughness of his research for this book, as he seems to have left no stone unturned. No one could guess that this was his first venture into writing. The story is skilfully constructed and written. The style is pleasantly easy to read.

Since I was working in the North Sea around the time of the *Wildrake* accident, I recall vividly the horror of the nightmare scenario that unfolded at the time. For that reason, I have to confess that I did not look forward to reading the book. I did not want to revisit the nightmare.

Now that I have read it, I am extremely glad that I did. It has answered the many questions that went unanswered at the time. In so doing, it has helped to bring closure.

Many of the people involved, I knew, and still know some, personally, both the good and the bad guys, and have even worked with several of them. The book confirms my opinions and suspicions.

The book names the principal culprit as Brian Masterson, the owner of Infabco Diving Services.

It paints a picture of a ruthless megalomaniac who was also a corrupt con man. Diving Superintendents Peter Holmes and John Nadeau, and Diving Supervisor Craig Roberts also come in for stinging criticism for incompetence. In the client oil company, British National Oil Corporation (BNOC), Joe Singletary and Terry Slusher are identified as corrupt and incompetent. They disappeared from the company shortly after the accident. I recall how they flaunted their gold jewellery at the time.

These are the men that were behind the loss of the diving bell which ended up in 500 feet of water, with a failed main-lift wire connection, no transponder and no stand-off frame. As well, there were drop weights that could not be dropped, inadequate emergency thermal suits, no emergency through-water comms or emergency guide wire recovery facility, and no umbilical emergency lifting capability. Add to this the fact that the diving operation was illegal and the diving system had been so degraded by incompetent modifications that it was no longer certifiable, and it sets the scene for the tragic accident to occur.

After the disaster of the loss of the bell, they then proceeded to pursue the most incompetent emergency rescue procedure, willfully ignoring advice and offers of help from more competent sources. The situation was so farcical, it beggars belief.

The tragedy was compounded by a botched prosecution case in the UK. All this is detailed in the book.

The author takes the opportunity to take a swipe at the Department of Energy (DOE) Diving Inspectorate. At this point I departed from his rationale. To

me, it was one-sided and failed to look at the bigger picture.

The inspectorate and regulations were developing in tandem with the offshore diving industry, which itself was developing faster than at any time in its history. It is thanks to the DOE that the UK was the first to bring in effective legislation for offshore diving that was envied and copied all over the world. It was

also the DOE that provided the foundations of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Diving Inspectorate, which despite its limitations, provides the most effective policing system in the world. The foundations laid by the DOE is the reason that the North Sea is as safe as it is for divers today.

Into the Lion's Mouth should be a set book for everybody involved

in offshore diving. It is a must read. There is no excuse for not reading it.

(Reviewed by Dr John Bevan, Chairman and Managing Director, Submex Limited)

This book review has previously been published in the *Underwater Contractor International Journal*, January/February 2012 issue.

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