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Last weekend's helicopter crash shakes up offshore workers

by Jen DeGregorio, The Times-Picayune
Saturday January 10, 2009, 10:02 PM

Natalie Colon was on an oil rig deep in the Gulf of Mexico on Jan. 4 when word spread that a helicopter carrying a crew of offshore workers crashed in Terrebonne Parish, killing eight people.

The news chilled her. Four years working as an offshore technician has made helicopter travel about as daunting to Colon as a commute across Lake Pontchartrain by car. But the fatal accident gave her no choice but to acknowledge the unique perils of her trade.

"It's shocking," said Colon, a 27-year-old Ohio resident, who commutes to Louisiana by plane before hopping a helicopter to get to work in the Gulf. "It's a dangerous job."

Indeed, the oil and gas sector is among the nation's deadliest, with a mortality rate that is seven times greater than the typical worker encounters.

Yet air travel has posed a minor threat. Of the 526 deaths that occurred in the industry from 2003 to 2007, just 20 were the result of air accidents, according to an analysis by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By far, the greatest dangers to workers in the industry have been highway crashes and mishaps in the field, such as dropped objects, which account for more than half of fatalities.

The problem is only getting worse. The fatality rate has doubled in the past decade, from about 15 deaths per 100,000 workers in 1999 to 30 deaths per 100,000 workers in 2007. The CDC attributes the trend to increased drilling activity: The number of active drilling rigs both onshore and offshore grew from more than 800 during the 1990s to about 1,300 at the end of 2006.

Yet for Colon and thousands of others, the hazards are worth the benefits of high pay and a work schedule that offers long periods of time off.

"I think it's good for a life-work balance," said Colon, who often works for weeks at a time on platforms and rigs in exchange for equivalent work-free periods. "It gives you time for hobbies and time to reap the rewards of your hard work."

When she is not in the Morgan City office of Oceaneering International, a Houston company, Colon visits her family, which is spread across the globe from Virginia to Puerto Rico.

"It's like mini vacations," said Colon, who came to the offshore industry after three years in the Army. "There's always somewhere I get to go."

Sean Stokes, 42, left a comfortable job editing a weekly newspaper in Texas during the late 1980s when he learned he could more than double his money working on the water. He began as a low-level mariner, staffing crew boats for a small company owned by his step-brother. He then moved on to jobs for larger companies, such as Freeport-McMoRan, before eventually landing with Oceaneering, where he worked as a captain on boats stationed at offshore platforms and rigs.

Stokes returned to the land side of the offshore business in April. He now oversees boat security from Oceaneering's Morgan City office, a position that comes with the title "designated person ashore."

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"I'm still getting used to being inside," he said.

Stokes touted his profession as one of the few fields in which a person can earn a good living without extensive formal education. A galley hand with no training can easily earn \$100 per day and train for higher positions that could bring the salary closer to \$500 per day in about four years.

"It's the only job where a guy without a college degree can (increase by) four times his salary in four years," Stokes said.

Archie Huskims, a North Carolina resident who also commutes to Oceanengineering's Morgan City office, has worked offshore since he retired from the military about a year and a half ago. Like Colon, Huskims relishes the extended periods of time off. He also enjoys the collegial atmosphere aboard the offshore facilities.

"It's like a dormitory," he said. "A lot of your new rigs are really comfortable, with plasma TVs."

Huskims said he rarely thinks about the risks involved in his vocation.

"It's not often a helicopter goes down," he said.

Of nearly the 1.3 million helicopter flights for the Gulf of Mexico's offshore industry in 2007, there were seven accidents, two of them fatal. That translates into a fatal accident rate of 0.49 deaths per 100,000 flight hours, according to the Helicopter Safety Advisory Conference, which tracks industry air travel in the Gulf. That makes offshore flying safer than general aviation, which in 2007 saw 1.19 deaths per 100,000 flight hours, according to the federal National Transportation Safety Board.

Still, the increase in the number of overall fatalities in the industry has not escaped the attention of oil and gas companies, from the smallest firms to giants such as Shell Oil, which had hired the PHI Inc. helicopter that crashed Jan. 4 to bring a crew of contract employees to two of its offshore platforms. Only one of the seven crew members survived.

"We're all obviously deeply troubled by the eight fatalities and helicopter crash," said David Frost, a safety manager at Shell. "We take every incident seriously, from a finger cut to a fatality."

Although a job in the oil and gas industry is among the riskiest professions, there are more treacherous vocations. Commercial fishing tops the list, with about 112 deaths per 100,000 workers in 2007, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. Loggers, aircraft pilots, structural steel workers and farmers also have a greater risk of dying on the job than someone employed in the oil and gas industry.

INDUSTRY FATALITY RATES

Among leading industries, oil and gas extraction jobs have the highest fatality rate:

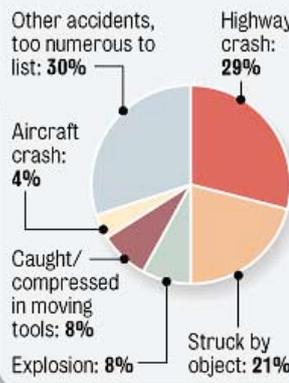
Occupation sector	Total fatalities in 2007	Fatality rate*
Agriculture, forestry fishing and hunting	573	27.3
Mining	181	24.8
Oil and gas extraction**	120	28.1
Transportation and warehousing	836	15.9
Construction	1,178	10.3
Wholesale trade	197	

*Deaths per 100,000 employees.
**Oil and gas extraction is a subset of mining.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

DANGEROUS WORK

Fatality causes in the oil and gas extraction industry between 2003 and 2007



THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Still, Frost said the industry is not proud of its position among the most dangerous sectors and has struggled mightily to avoid accidents."Companies have been spending a lot of money on training to more or less manage how

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their employees are doing their work," said Joe Hurt, a vice president of the International Association of Drilling Contractors. "Safety is just something you've got to constantly work at. You can't do it a little bit and say, 'Okay, we've got it fixed.'"

Shell has had more trouble curbing fatalities than many of its competitors. The Financial Times reported last month that Royal Dutch Shell had the highest mortality rate of any large western oil company, with two employees and 28 contractors dying in the line of duty in 2007. That compared with the deaths of three employees and four contractors for BP, and eight contractors for ExxonMobil, according to the publication.

Frost said Shell has implemented more rigorous training programs and has seen fatalities drop significantly as a result. The thirty people who died while working for Shell in 2007 is a vast improvement from the 67 people who died working for the company in 1997. Shell describes its efforts to eliminate on-the-job fatalities as "Goal Zero."

Colon and Huskims, who often work as a team, said their company has tight safety guidelines, requiring an hour-long meeting before the beginning of each shift.

"They really think of everything," Huskims said.

The CDC has been trying to reduce the number of deaths in the industry with its Oil and Gas Extraction Safety and Health Program in Alaska. Ryan Hill, a safety researcher with the program, said the industry could make great strides by raising awareness about basic safety measures, such as seatbelt use, the lack of which contributed to many of the sector's deaths in the last five years.

"They are frequently dragged between drilling sites as part of their every day jobs," Hill said of oil and gas workers.

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