

RESCUE AT SEA:

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS

Decisions on a Dime

"Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin." — Mother Theresa

Even a seasoned rescuer finds themselves in unlikely situations. Glancing at a text that came across screen at work, I read: *There's a rescue in the Gulf, we can't do it, is there any way you can?*

Question 1: *Is there any way you can?*

yes. I text back, and immediately my mind starts racing through the questions and logistics. He writes back: *Explosion, 5 people trapped, unknown cause.*

Planning Logistics:

- **Rescue Team Members (who and how many)**
- **Money/ funding**
- **Gear (how to get it there and what to bring). Flying limits the amount of gear you can bring in a quick turn-around**
- **Body bags**
- **Water**
- **Food**
- **5 Gas, Etc.**

With very little initial information and time, I had to make the decision to choose a team of rescuers to retrieve three bodies of men who had died from an unknown cause in international waters. We left the following afternoon.

More Planning and Preparation

"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." — Benjamin Franklin

Later, we received the blueprint of the decommissioned oil rig and I studied it as we made the journey from Wyoming to Louisiana. Three men were stuck in a confined space approximately 170 feet down the leg of a decommissioned offshore drilling rig. Complicating the matter even more, the accident involved coordinating and communicating with a group of Indian seamen, the coastguard, coroner, ports, helicopter service, boat captains, two large companies from India, all within international waters. Navigating the nuances of the retrieval, while also balancing the sensitivity of different cultures and burial procedures, as well as the skepticism surrounding the events of the accident became something I wanted to share with other rescuers. I found myself faced with many different tough decisions that required accuracy, competency, and perfect execution.

Travel Takeaways:

- **Charting a private jet can be more cost effective than flying commercial (if timing is critical)**
- **Flying with compressed air (SCBA) is tricky: some Helicopter operations strictly forbid it, while others allowed it on the aircraft.**
- **Coast Guard may or may not help you: they are not as trained in the technical side of rescue (i.e. confined space, high angle)**
- **Getting schematics for the space and vessel is good; although getting our eye on the prize revealed the changes that had happened to the vessel over time, and it had changed drastically from the original blueprints.**
- **International Waters has a unique set of challenges**

Retrieval: Tight spaces, time crunches, and exhaustion

“Not all knowledge comes from college.” — *Mike Rowe*

In a catastrophe, many people (especially “big wigs”) are trying to scramble quickly to solve the problem. Too many “cooks in the kitchen” become a problem, and I quickly learned I had to make the decisions that would execute the job safely and efficiently rather than listen to the many opinions surrounding us. Owners of the rig were trying to call the shots, although they are not technical rescuers and did not understand the many intricacies of it all.

Decision making:

- **1 hour helicopter flight vs. 3-4 hour boat ride:** Owners of the rig were trying to call the shots, and wanted us to take a 3-4 hour (one way, on calm seas) boat ride to cut cost. I chose to find a helicopter to prevent any sea sickness from my team members and I knew we needed every bit of daylight to work and wanted to prevent extreme exhaustion from both the rescue and travel time. If one member fails, it makes our whole team dysfunctional to some degree. The owner made plans to use the crane from the rig to bring us aboard from the boat ride; in the end the rig was decommissioned, the crane didn't work and actually came crashing down at one point. We had made the right original decision.
- **Hazards are everywhere:** Decommissioned oil rigs have hazards everywhere! The floor of the deck was so rickety, we had to watch injuring ourselves by falling through the floor. The crane, as aforementioned literally came crashing down when we tried to use it.
- **Ensure the condition of your vessel:** Hope for the best, but plan for the worst. Decommissioned vessels are much different than working on functioning vessels.
- **Guys for the job:** Each team member needs to have a job, and to be dialed at that job. Hazmat specialists, technical rescue specialists.
- **IDLH atmosphere:** There is no onboard air, so you must be self sufficient. SAR equipment is too much weight and too big, so SCBA is what we used, which limits time and certain safety backups.
- **Transportation of bodies once retrieved:** Finding transportation for the bodies, ports that will accept them back into a country they are not originally citizens of, as well as finding autopsy services was a whole different set of challenges.
- **Technical Rescues:** When people have descended and fallen into tight spaces such as this, it becomes extremely technical and even potentially hazardous to the rescuers.
- **Maneuvering 8 deviations in a 3 foot diameter space:** Munter Mule with a 6' length of cord.

- **Navigating different cultures:** These men were from India and had different burial customs. The vessel still occupied by fellow crew members, and the men who had deceased, had family members waiting for their return in India.
- **Keeping the team safe:** Exhaustion from the heat, extreme physical labor, lack of food and water in Tyvex Suits over an extended period of time was high on my radar of potential hazards.

Moving Forward

“Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.” — *T.S. Eliot*

Other countries purchase American offshore drilling rigs to use/sell as scrap metal. This is a multi-million dollar industry, and although this was a unique situation, it may become more prevalent in the future. It is important to know how to operate technical rescues in international spaces.

The importance of communication when navigating the personal interactions of foreign businesses, respecting the losses of these men and the impact it had on the remaining seamen as well as families we had never met. The cause of death for these men, was quickly put under scrutiny due to the lack of initial information and conflicting initial information- not foul play.

Releasable Deviations

We learned the most efficient way to maneuver through the 8 deviations in a confined space was to use **Releasable Deviations**. These were cost effective, efficient, and reliable in this type of scenario.