# Death and Oil: A True Story of the Piper Alpha Disaster on the North Sea

*Brad Matsen*
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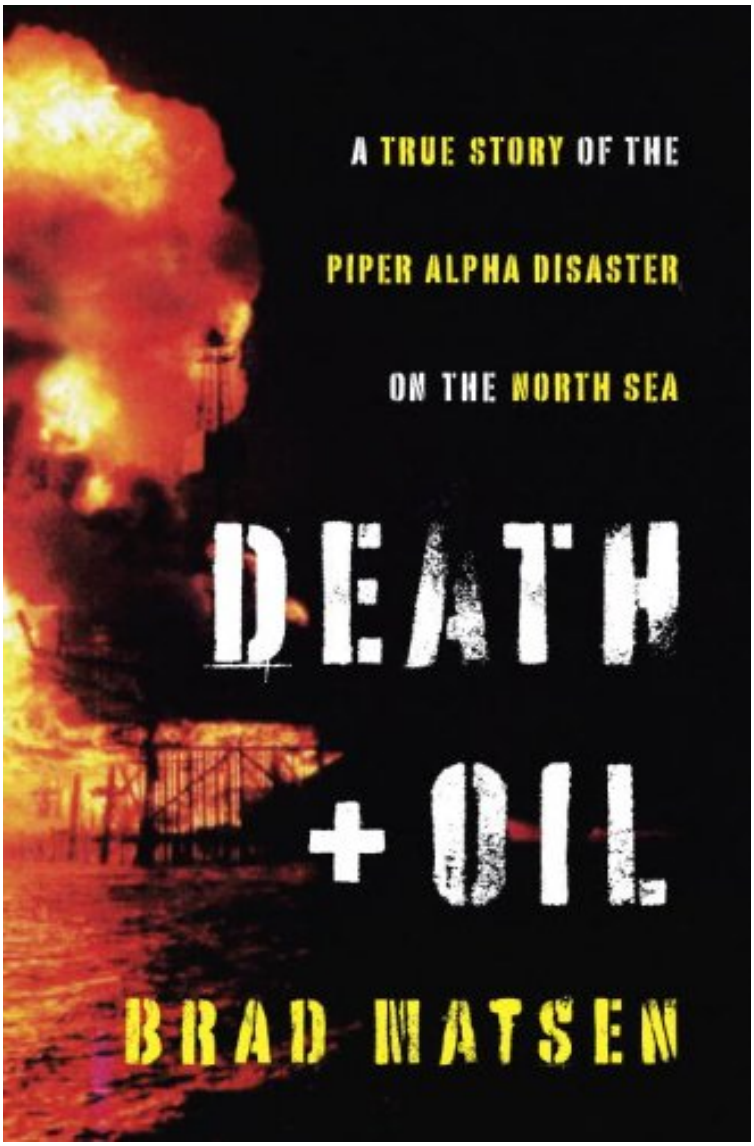




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**Brad Matsen : Death and Oil: A True Story of the Piper Alpha Disaster on the North Sea** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Death and Oil: A True Story of the Piper Alpha Disaster on the North Sea:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Masterpiece of Writing and InvestigationBy PeterA gripping tale. Could not put the book down - read it in two sittings.The author's command of English is outstanding. The sentences are compact, showing respect for the reader's knowledge of machinery and mechanics.One question I have about the

incident itself is what action was available to the operators that would have avoided the Pump A start when Pump B became unusable. I've read several authors, and none describe what solution was available, short of shutting down.Further, the author suggests that the flows from Tartan, MCP-01 and Claymore should have been stopped when Piper Alpha had the first of its four major explosions, but never pierces the cloak over those decisions.Personal comment:Just recently, in my work as a software engineer, an operator started a second copy of a process, designed for just one to run, resulting in damage. Piper Alpha, for engineers, and even electricians, remains the example held up when there is an inadequate control design. Had the condensate injection pump on Piper Alpha been removed from service by physically locking its switches, with an attached tag, the decision to start would nit have been made. Sadly, in my recent case, a simple one line fix to code, adding a process shutdown command as part of the process startup, remains unimplemented by management. My only revenge is to mention Piper Alpha and study it.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Four StarsBy DenisVery good. For anyone involved in this crappy industry, it"s worth reading.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Well researched and writtenBy bruceianVery well researched and written. Should be of interest to anyone interested in the offshore oil industry.

The first full account of the most tragic oil rig disaster in history, the human story behind it, and the true nature of its legacy.nbsp;July 6, 1988, began as a normal day on Piper Alpha, the biggest offshore oil rig on the North Sea. But just after 10:00 p.m., a series of explosions rocked the platform, and the inferno continued to burn for weeks. Of the 226 men working on the platform, 162 died, along with two of their would-be rescuers. Brad Matsen talked to the survivors and their families; to the rescue teams, firefighters, and hospital workers; and to other witnesses. Now he brings together the full story of the human error and corporate malfeasance behind this tragedy.nbsp;Here is a comprehensive account of the catastrophe, from the origins of the fires on the rig to the investigation into the causes of its demise to the pain it continues to cause the survivors and the families of the dead. Written with a novelistrsquo;s sense of pace and eye for detail, it is a riveting, gut-wrenching saga, made even more timely and important in light of recent disasters.From the Hardcover edition.

ldquo;Compulsive reading. . . . Matsenrsquo;s well-constructed book employs the established technique of novels with many simultaneous activities being dealt with chapter by chapter, and provides a rich backdrop of the circumstances on shore and the lives of some of the individuals and their families, as well as an account of the disaster itself.rdquo; mdash;Newark Star-Ledgerldquo;A spare, fast-paced account of the Piper Alpha tragedy as riveting as it is unsettling. . . . Through interviews with survivors and their families and an exhaustive review of the record, Matsen uncovers a disturbing tale of corporate negligence, criminal disregard and a reckless drive for profit. At the same time he brings to light uncommon acts of heroism among survivors and rescuers as well as those who work for increased safety standards in this most dangerous of professions. . . . Matsen meticulously details the circumstances surrounding the catastrophe. But more than that, he sensitively portrays the personal lives of many victims, survivors and their anguished families. His reports from the nearby town of Aberdeen, where many of the offshore workers lived, are heartbreaking.rdquo; mdash;Seattle Timesnbsp;ldquo;Death and Oil is a personal book for Brad Matsen and his detailed look at the disaster is an epic success. And it is a book that should be read by anyone caught in crisis of petro-conscience.rdquo; mdash;Boston Book Bums blog"With the same meticulous research employed in books on sea explorer Jacques Cousteau and the mysteries of the oceans, Matsen (Jacques Cousteau: The Sea King) takes on the devastating 1988 Piper Alpha oil rig tragedy. . . . When he details the unfortunate history of fires, explosions, even collapses, of rigs, the Piper Alpha disaster is put into context, making rig work one of the most hazardous jobs on the planet. In the end, Matsenrsquo;s remarkable book is a stunning tribute to the survivors and their families." mdash;Publishers Weeklyldquo;Matsenrsquo;s horrifyingly readable account of the 1988 oil rig explosion that killed more than 160 people is a terrible reminder that the activity of extracting oilmdash;and coal, and gasmdash;has always included death as just a cost of doing business.rdquo;nbsp;mdash;Carl Safina, author of A Sea In Flames and The View From Lazy Point"Death and Oil masterfully reveals the terrible human toll of our petroleum dependency. By taking us aboard the Piper Alpha oil rig and into the lives of its doomed men, its heroes and its haunted survivors, Brad Matsen has given us narrative history at its best and a cautionary tale for our time." mdash;Mitchell Zuckoff, New York Times bestselling author of Lost in Shangri-La"A searing indictment of human greed mixed with memorable sagas of death and survival." mdash;Kirkus s"Matsenrsquo;s extraordinary and captivating account of the Piper Alpha catastrophe makes visible the terrible price we pay for oil. It offers a compelling look into the embattled lives of men who spend their lives on the verge of an emergency, and shows us what happens when a place of workmdash;in truth a war zonemdash;becomes an inferno in an instant." mdash;Rikki Ducornet, author of the novels Netsuke and GazelleAbout the AuthorBRAD MATSEN is the author of Jacques Cousteau: The Sea King, Titanicrsquo;s Last Secrets: The Further Adventures of Shadow Divers John Chatterton and Richie Kohler, Descent: The Heroic Discovery of the Abyss, and many other books about the sea and its inhabitants. He was a creative producer for the television series The Shape of Life, and his articles on marine science and the environment have appeared in Mother Jones, Audubon, and Natural History, among other publications. He lives in Port Townsend, Washington.Excerpt.

OneCADDYSHACKA few minutes before ten orsquo;clock on the night of July 6, 1988, Bill Barron was in the cinema on Piper Alpha, Occidental Petroleumrsquo;s champion oil rig 110 miles northeast of Aberdeen in the North Sea. He and a few other men were watching Caddyshack, a farce starring Bill Murray and Rodney Dangerfield. It was a golf movie. Golf was as central to the Scottish character as haggis, defiance, and whiskey, but everybody had already seen it at least once. Some of the men nodded off, tired after finishing their shifts. Barron was half asleep himself, huddled in the cinema out of boredom more than anything. A couple of the men were venting the tension of their workday by reciting punch lines along with the characters on the screen. When Rodney Dangerfield broke wind at a fancy dinner party, they tortured his words with an Aberdonian Doric brogue. ldquo;Whoa, did somebody step on a duck?rdquo;nbsp;The cinema was one of the concessions to comfort that publicity flaks for Occidental and the other oil companies liked to point out in interviews about life offshore. The room had theater seats just like the ones back in Aberdeen, with a video projection booth at the back of the room. The men were away from home for weeks at a time, subjected to the stresses of being surrounded by volatile, toxic chemistry, but they had hot showers, clean sheets, good food, and movies to make their days as bearable as possible. The message was that drilling the bottom of the ocean for oil was a technological challenge akin to taking a trip to the moon but that life aboard a rig was pretty good.nbsp;Bill Barron was drowsily watching Bill Murray whack the blossoms in a flower bed with a golf club when he picked up a faintly unfamiliar sensation. Usually, the air on Piper Alpha carried the slick fragrance of hydrocarbons and the constant noise of metal-to-metal torment of a dozen kinds, but you got used to it. Sometimes, when the wind shifted, or a big pump shut down, or a heavy load crashed from a crane hook to the deck, the sensory blend changed just enough to trigger an alarm in him. Barron remembered many moments during his ten years offshore when some distinct change in the smells and sounds of the rig urged him to flee. What he heard in the cinema was something new, a treble rumbling more visceral than audible. He sensed it for a few seconds, woke fully, and sagged back into the chair when it was gone.nbsp;Caddyshack had been showing on Piper Alpha for a week. Barron, who was not much of a golfer himself, absorbed the antics on the screen with the same stoic good humor he brought to most of the hours in his days. He was well- settled in himself as a working man who was grateful to have had a good job for most of his life. He did what he was getting paid for and led an essentially interior existence, with a demeanor that was perfectly suited for living well offshore. In the confined spaces of Piper Alpha, a man was better off taking up as little room as possible. Barron never ceased to be amazed that he could be eating a lamb chop for dinner, or enjoying the tropical fish in their tanks in the galley, or watching a movie with the worldrsquo;s biggest oil rig vibrating beneath him. He had gone outside for a few minutes after dinner and knew that the air was still and the sea calm. It was a beautiful evening in one of the most unlikely places in which a man might find himself, especially since the North Sea was usually a nightmare of rain, wind, and waves big enough to shake the rig like it was made of twigs instead of steel. Barron remembered storms so violent he was surprised to find himself still alive at dawn getting ready for another work day, nights when sleep was impossible against the howling and shuddering of gusts the men would all talk about in the morning. A hundred miles an hour. A hundred and ten. Waves big enough to wash through the upper decks carrying anything that wasnrsquo;t bolted down into the dark sea below. As the painting boss, Barron knew every inch of Piper Alpha like no one else. Though he would always rather be at home in Aberdeen, he felt a sense of proprietorship about the rig that surprised him. It was, after all, just a giant machine absurdly plopped down in the middle of the ocean. nbsp;Piper Alpha was an awkward layer cake of steel on spindly legs that looked a lot like a gigantic moon lander from the Apollo missions. It had a bottom tier of four distinct aluminum modulesmdash;the wellhead; oil and gas separator pumps; gas compression pumps; and main power generators. Above these were the drilling derrick, a crane, and modules for storage, pressure tanks, and exhaust pipes. At the top of the rig were four tiers of crew accommodations that held a hundred and fifty sleeping cabins, a dining room, three game rooms, a library, the movie theater, and the administrative offices. The rig was seven hundred feet tall, four hundred and seventy- five feet of which were underwater, where the rig was anchored by steel and concrete to the seafloor.nbsp;The cinema was a twenty-five-by-twenty-five-foot corner of the accommodation module. The sleeping cabins would be familiar to third- class passengers on a ship, with berths for two or four men, a compact sink, shower, and toilet. Each deck had a locker room where the men shed their boots and coveralls after work in an effort to keep their sleeping cabins relatively free from the grime of the rig. The offshore installation manager, who was as omnipotent as a shiprsquo;s captain, had his stateroom and an office on A Deck. It was the lowest in the accommodation stack, also housing fifteen cabins, a small gym with a treadmill, a rowing machine, a stationary bicycle, and an assortment of free weights. Off one corridor on B Deck were the offices for other supervisors, including Bill Barron; another changing room; the laundry; and twenty- one cabins. C Deck, where the cinema occupied one corner, held thirty- two cabins, two locker rooms, and two lounges with desks, reading chairs, and couches. D Deck was the top of the stack, with fourteen cabins, the sick bay, recreation room, rig- to- shore telephones, radio room, duty- free store, pantry, kitchen, and a dining roommdash;known as the canteenmdash; that could seat sixty men.nbsp;The thirty-by-thirty-foot room had serving hatches opening into the kitchen on the south wall and three square chest-high windows on the north. Against the facing wall were a pair of glass tanks in which an assortment of tropical fish added unlikely life and color to the institutional room. The kitchen could turn out six meals

a day for as many as 250 men. A double door in the east wall of the galley led to a reception alcove. Corridors and staircases branched off to sleeping cabins, the sick bay, walk- in freezers, and the pantry. A duty- free bond shop that sold cigarettes, perfume, aftershave, and sweets was in a cubbyhole at the south end of the reception area. When the Dutch door to the shop was open, a model lifeboat with a coin slot in its deck sat on the service counter for donations to the Royal Lifeboat Society. The four decks of the accommodation module were linked by exterior steel stairwaysmdash;called ladders in the nautical traditionmdash;with handrails on both sides. In the winter, the ladders were icy and treacherous, but even in summer, oil and dampness coated every surface. A slip-and-fall on an oil rig could easily be fatal. After a few trips offshore, the instinct to reach for a handrail on any set of stairs never left a man.nbsp;The living conditions were as good as any in the British sector of the North Sea, though everybody envied the men on Norwegian rigs, which were much more luxurious. Offshore veterans relished the pranks they played on new men. A favorite was telling a rookie that a chopper was coming after dinner to take them over to a rig on the Norwegian side that had a disco and plenty of women for dancing. The helicopter landing officer was in on the joke. Most new guys spent a cold hour or two on the helipad waiting in the wind for the disco chopper before they figured it out.nbsp;Offshore workers took a job on Piper Alpha with trepidation. Even in calm seas, the rig trembled with an unsettling vibration. In heavy weather, it lurched and shuddered like it was about to come apart. It was noisy as hell and it stunk. All rigs smelled of sulfur, but Piper Alpha put out something extra that took the aroma into the realm of the vile. Everyone was leery, too, of Occidentalrsquo;s pride in the incredible production of its star offshore platform. The flow of oil to the pipeline terminal at Flotta on Orkney Island rarely fell below 100,000 barrels a day, worth from $1.5 to $4 million depending on the volatile global price for petroleum. On a great day, with everything working just right, Piper Alpha gushed 250,000 barrels of oil through its shore- bound pipeline. The record was 284,000 barrels, set just before demand slumped in the price wars of the early 1980s. The pressure to perform motivated some of the men who liked setting records, but it also increased tension on the platform and most of the workers could not care less how much money Occidental Petroleum made from their labor.nbsp;Offshore lore was as potent as storytelling in any other insular culture. Everybody knew that in June 1975 Piper Alpha killed its first man even before the rig was fully assembled. Parts of it were manufactured in Cherbourg, France, and loaded aboard a barge in the English Channel for shipment to the main fabrication yard at Ardersier, northeast of Inverness. In dense fog, a freighter sailed between the tug and barge and snared the half- mile- long towing cable. The freighter broke apart, the pieces went down in minutes, and one of its six crewmen was never found. Maritime disasters have happened regularly on the English Channel and the North Sea forever, but what made this one big news was Occidental Petroleumrsquo;s earlier stream of press releases crowing about their gigantic rig. It would be the heaviest e...