

## Waving—Not Drowning

It was a lovely afternoon, some one hundred miles out in the North Sea on one of our Production Platforms. Bert, Liam and I were leaning over the rail, taking a well-earned break from dismantling things, and our conversation turned to the size of waves. Contrary to popular belief we didn't always talk about the relative merits of Sophia Loren's womanly bits; mostly—yes, but not always, and especially not in daylight.

The main thing here is not to confuse our North Sea waves with those upon which blond gods in rubber suits stand on ironing boards and crash into rocks in Cornwall. Our waves were deeply masculine, about a mile long and, having come unhindered from somewhere in the Arctic Circle, were not about to let a silly little oil platform get in their way.

Anyway, as we watched the waves surge towards us, we tried to guess their height, as an intellectual exercise—consisting mainly of ill-founded pronouncements followed by a chorus of derision, as our scientific estimates of the actual height, based on staring at the water, ranged wildly from thirty to fifty feet.

Liam said, 'Don't forget, we're trying to estimate the total height of the wave, which is the difference in height between the crest and the trough.' Liam was prone to making obvious statements like this; we called them his *Reader's Digest* moments.

Our frustration, in this search for precision, was summed up by Bert who said, 'The problem is, we're looking down on the sea from about eighty feet up and to be accurate we would need to be lower down.' You can see why we were called engineers.

As ever, Liam had the answer. 'I know where we can get under the deck and drop down much closer to sea level.'

Being nominally in charge, I really should have known better, but the idea seemed innocent enough and was certainly better than taking things apart to see how they worked—or not, as the case may be.

So, with Liam in the lead, off we went to the far end of the platform where, on lifting up a cover in the grating, we saw a vertical ladder welded to one of the giant legs.

Down we went until we reached a narrow walkway running north and south between two of the legs. Suddenly the water looked a whole lot nearer. Gosh, what excitement, we could watch the waves approaching and estimating their height became considerably easier.

This was why we had come to work offshore, to be all alone in the wild elements, about sixty feet under the deck in the company of fine comrades. What more could we ask for? Both Bert and I were full of praise for Liam, which turned out to be somewhat premature and was firmly retracted later.

However, here we were, close to the might of nature and loving every minute of it, until Bert spoiled everything by saying, 'Of course you know that every seventh wave is bigger than the others.'

Liam looked at him with something approaching pity and replied, 'Where the hell did you get that rubbish from? And how would you know which wave was the first one to count from anyway?'

Liam really hated it when Bert or I seemed to know more technical things than he did.

Bert looked suitably offended and retorted, 'Well that's what my Granny used to tell us when we went to the beach in Aberdeen.'

'Stop it, children,' I said in one of my rare managerial moments. 'Let's just enjoy the power of the waves, which is what we have climbed down umpteen feet of ladders to see.'

Suitably chastened, we all turned northwards to watch the onrushing waves and quickly reverted to three little boys jumping up and down, laughing at each other, pointing at the waves as they raced towards us and whooshed under the fragile steel walkway—yes, this was a whole lot better than working in a coal mine.

Then, during a lull in the excitement, Bert suddenly piped up, 'Bloody hell; look at the size of that thing coming our way.'

We looked up and sure enough a massive wall of water about the size of a multi-storey car park was coming straight for us. As we stared in mounting horror, it crashed into one of the platform legs, reared up and continued southwards like a mad express train.

At this point, I found myself staring into two pairs of wide-open eyes as my brave soldiers tried to hide inside my overalls. There then followed a brief dance, reminiscent of one of those insect mating rituals you see on David Attenborough programmes, as each of us tried to push the others to breast the onslaught.

However, a moment later and despite our futile and cowardly attempts at self-preservation, a considerable amount of the North Sea landed on squarely top of us.

As we clung onto the handrails, each other and our (own) private parts, a number of hitherto unknown facts emerged—not only were the waves bigger down here, they were freezing cold, very heavy, very wet and filled boots, pockets and every known orifice in a millisecond.

Bert, who had started wearing his chinstrap casually around the rim of his safety helmet, Clint Eastwood style, found the helmet had been swept off his head and was now, presumably, well on its way to France.

There then followed a most embarrassing period when *esprit de corps* gave way to a good deal of pushing and shoving in our pathetic attempts to get back up the ladder before Liam—and certainly before another of nature's wonders hit us.

Bert and I were sustained during the climb by cursing Liam without either drawing breath or repeating a single swear word, in what turned out to be a vast and impressive repertoire.

But the most embarrassing thing of all was the need to sneak back into the accommodation without dripping seawater all over the lino-tiles—preferably without being seen either.

Bert, who was ever the worrier, said, ‘What the hell are we going to say if anyone asks why we’re soaking wet?’

Liam cheerfully replied, ‘We’ll casually mention that we’ve just tested the deluge system in the well-head module and it works fine.’

However I could see a flaw in this. ‘But if we were testing a system which was designed to flood the equivalent of an aircraft hanger in about four seconds, wouldn’t we be outside it?’

Bert concurred. ‘And won’t people be suspicious if they go into the well-head and see it’s bone-dry?’

To which I had to add, ‘Won’t someone in the Control Room notice that the fire pump hasn’t been switched on? We would need that to test the deluge system.’

Liam, who hated us picking holes in what he considered to be perfect logic, finally snapped. ‘You two ungrateful sods can just stop bloody nit-picking,’ he growled. ‘I’m away to get changed.’ And off he squelched.

Liam always, mistakenly, thought he had an ability to maintain dignity under duress—or something equally puerile.

I, however, was left with a distinct feeling that were he ever to mention the fun to be had skydiving, I should ask for a transfer, or better still, throw him overboard.

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