

HISTORICAL

Black Friday tragedy on a nation's treasure trove

IT WAS to be a big day aboard the Barracouta natural gas rig, a drilling platform rising 65 metres above Bass Strait that symbolised one of Australia's greatest resource discoveries.

The gas it drew from the depths was to guarantee light and heat for Melbourne and Victoria for decades to come, while the oil in nearby undersea fields was to be a national treasure trove.

For the first time, the proud corporate pioneers, BHP and its operating partner the United States giant Esso, were permitting a party of journalists and photographers to see where it all began.

Their words and pictures would show Australia and the world their achievement in drawing wealth from a hostile environment of deep and turbulent water, a shifting seabed and a surface often swept by unpredictable hurricane-force winds.

As it happened, the day for the media visit, Friday, March 22, 1968, was calm but overcast as 27 newspaper and TV journalists and cameramen gathered at Sale, the Gippsland coastal town that was the supply and transport headquarters for the rig, 25km out to sea.

Two pilots aboard a Bell 204B helicopter, operated by Sydney-based Helicopter Utilities Pty Ltd and contracted to Esso, ferried them out in groups, landing them on the rig's helipad that jutted out above the sea.

Like most media parties they were a mixed bag of personalities of varying experiences and ages.

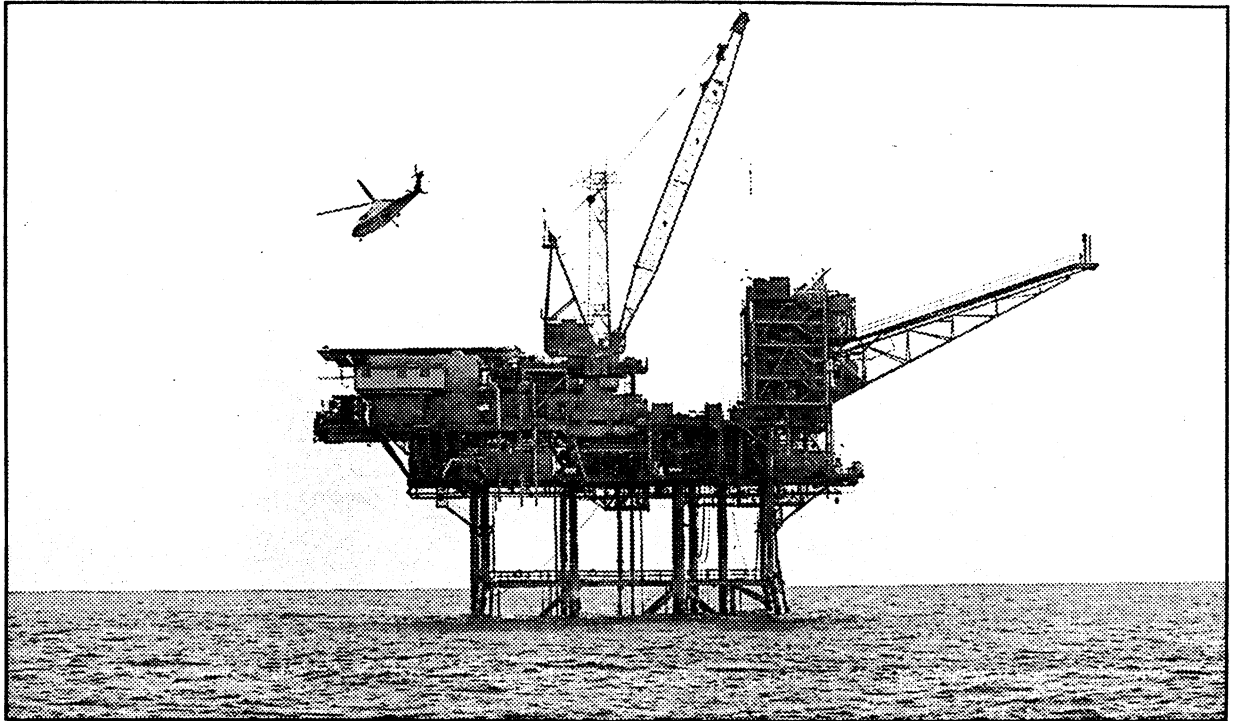
They included 60-year-old freelance photographer Ron Griffiths, on assignment for local newspaper The Gippsland Times, and 19-year-old Peter Burke, a cadet finance reporter from Melbourne's Sun News-Pictorial on his first out-of-town assignment after two years with the paper.

One of the stars was Hugh Curnow, 31, a special feature writer with Sydney's Sunday Telegraph, a world traveller famed for a scoop interview with actress Marlene Dietrich. The pair became close friends and she gave him permission to write the authorised biography of her life.

Under the guidance of Esso public relations manager Noel Buckley, the journalists swarmed over the rig, filming, taking photographs and notes as they were shown the crew's mess and quarters, the round-the-clock drilling operations and the radio room which kept this lonely island of men in touch with the outside world.

About noon the helicopter took five TV cameramen for a 10-minute spin around the rig so they could put an aerial perspective into the film they had shot while on board.

At the same time others in the



Barracouta rig, rising 65 metres above Bass Strait . . . while symbolising one of Australia's greatest resource discoveries, it also became the scene of horrific carnage

media party, their inspection finished, prepared to return to Sale, eight of them gathering on the helipad and three others on the stairway from the deck below, where the rest waited.

Bryan Frith, business columnist for The Australian, who was then Melbourne-based, remembers that many of the Sydney journalists were keen to get back and were on the helipad for the first air ferry trip to Sale.

Jules Zanetti, business editor of the Sydney Daily Mirror, said while he was standing on the edge of the helipad he called across to Buckley: "Should we be up here, Noel?" He seemed uncertain. "He shrugged and said: 'I suppose it will be all right if we get well on the edge'."

Zanetti said the hovering helicopter descended to about a metre above the pad and then "suddenly headed towards us . . . I heard a tremendous noise and I was certain the main rotor blades had struck the deck on the far side from us.

"I had an impression of pieces of metal flying off the tail section of the helicopter. The tail then began to swing in a clockwise direction."

What had happened was that the tail fin, weakened by a faulty tail rotor assembly, collapsed at a critical moment in the landing, sending the chopper out of the control of its pilot.

The rotor exploded into bits which tore like hand grenade fragments across the pad while the helicopter skidded on its side as a landing strut buckled, swirling the

machine clockwise through a 160 degree arc.

Zanetti said he found himself lying down on the wire-mesh strip at the edge of the pad. "I heard someone yelling: 'Keep your bloody heads down, the blades are still going around'."

"My arm felt numb and then I saw that my hand was by my head and pointing in the opposite direction to what it should have been."

Zanetti's arm had been severed below the right elbow as the exploding tail rotor and the spinning main rotor blades turned the rig helipad into a scene of terrifying carnage.

Hugh Curnow, standing on the access stairs, had been killed instantly, his body hurled to the deck below.

PETER Burke, the cadet reporter on his first big job, was torn by a rotor blade and tossed by the impact over the side of the pad. He hung on with both hands, called out once "help me", and then fell 40 metres into the sea.

Esso's Noel Buckley, 35, suffering horrific chest and leg injuries, lay bleeding as the helicopter came to rest after its murderous sweep of the pad.

ABC cameraman Wolfgang Beilharz, who was aboard the helicopter and leaning out to film the landing, said it came to rest at an angle: "There were blood and bodies everywhere.

"Nobody cried. There was just a

sudden silence."

Doctors flown in by helicopter from Sale had to land at a nearby rig and then reach Barracouta by boat because the wreckage and carnage on the pad left them no place to land.

One of them administered a transfusion of his own blood directly into Buckley's arm as they struggled to keep him alive.

A total of eight injured, including the local freelancer Ron Griffiths who suffered critical chest injuries, were flown to Gippsland Base Hospital at Sale.

Buckley remained on the rig as the doctors strove to save him, but he died soon after midnight. Burke's body was recovered by boat.

The tragedy marred the fine safety record of the Bass Strait consortium, and that Black Friday is omitted from Esso's public documents about its operations in one of the world's most lucrative oil and gas fields.

Even today the survivors are reluctant to talk about it. "I've tried to distance it from my mind," says Terry Phelan, who recently retired from the Sun News-Pictorial.

"I was afraid of flying for years afterwards," says Bryan Frith.

A coronial inquiry found the cause of the disaster was the omission from the helicopter's tail rotor assembly of a nylon thrust washer about the size of a \$2 coin.

Investigators later discovered the tiny washer on the floor of the helicopter company's workshop.

— ANTHONY CURTIS