

ENERGY

THE WATER MARGIN

Wanda Burt adapts to life on the edge of the world

By Jon Marsh





THE ALARM GOES OFF AT 5:55 am and Wanda Burt gets out of bed, showers, dresses and heads off to work for Husky Energy. It sounds like a normal routine shared by many of her fellow Canadians but her “office” is 350 kilometres off the coast of Newfoundland on the oil rich eastern rim of the North American continental shelf.

Wanda is one of 90 people who live on board the *SeaRose FPSO* in the middle of White Rose oil field. This remarkable floating, production, storage and offloading vessel separates oil, water and gas from the crude oil and then stores the processed oil before it is loaded onto shuttle tankers.

Wanda is a junior records analyst with the Document Control Centre where she performs the vital task of maintaining all the updated technical and safety manuals and ensuring hard copies are available for the operations team 24 hours a day. As we shall see, it is a job that can save lives in an emergency.

Conditions can get very rough and the oil field is in an area known locally as “iceberg alley”, the annual migration route of icebergs from the Arctic. Fortunately, 2006 has been relatively ice-free and the only concern for Wanda has been heavy blankets of fog. “In 30 years of living in Newfoundland, I’ve never seen anything like it,” she said. “It has to be one of the foggiest places in the world. But the sunsets are absolutely gorgeous. There’s no pollution out here.”



Wanda puts in 12-hour shifts while working on board for up to three weeks at a time. But it’s not all work and no play as the *SeaRose FPSO* is superbly equipped to look after her crew; the cabins are spotless and there’s a movie room, the gym, jam sessions in the music room and card games to keep people occupied.

And then there’s the food. “It’s a little too good,” chuckles Wanda. “It’s phenomenal. There’s a full breakfast with multi-grained bread with the crust on just for me. At lunch and dinner there are many choices of meats and salads.”

Wanda says her initial fears about being one of only a handful of females on board proved groundless. “You get to know each other pretty quickly when you are living together offshore,” she said. “And the work environment is really respectful. We’re family out here. It’s like having a whole batch of big brothers, and being an only child...that’s nice. It’s not all fun and games but it is a great experience, a totally different atmosphere work-wise. And I’ve always loved the water.”

Like many people from the sparsely-populated island of Newfoundland (pronounced Newf’nd-land) the sea has both beautiful and bitter memories for Wanda. One event in particular will never be forgotten.

The *Ocean Ranger* disaster occurred in February 1982 off Newfoundland. The rig sank in a storm and all 84 people on board were lost. The *Ocean Ranger* is a particularly emotional issue for just about everyone in the province - Newfoundland is still a very close-knit community - and most people were touched directly or indirectly by the disaster.

An official inquiry tightened safety regulations in the industry. For example, the crew of the *Ocean Ranger* had no manuals explaining how to repair a vital piece of equipment that could have saved the vessel (see sidebar). That could never happen

today thanks to the work of Wanda and her team.

Wanda was only a child when the *Ocean Ranger* went down and although she lost no members of her family it left a lasting impression.

“The *Ocean Ranger* disaster was one of the most influential events of my life,” she said. “I still remember

Left: Wanda Burt on the flight deck of the *SeaRose FPSO*, “It’s a great experience, a totally different atmosphere work-wise.”

THE OCEAN RANGER DISASTER

THE *OCEAN RANGER* was the *Titanic* of the offshore exploration industry. Operated by Mobil Oil, she was the largest semi-submersible, oil-drilling platform of the day and because of her size drilled in areas too dangerous for other rigs. Like the *Titanic*, the vessel was considered unsinkable.

On Sunday, 14 February 1982, a winter storm with 100 mph winds and 60 foot swells developed south of Newfoundland and headed for the Grand Banks where the *Ocean Ranger* was drilling 315 kilometres southeast of St John's. Around 7 pm, with seas now over 100 feet high, the crew informed the Mobil Oil shore base that the main deck had been hit by a huge wave.

Then another giant wave crashed over the rig, smashing through the ballast control room port hole. Water rushed in, shorted the control panel, causing the rig to list to about 10 degrees.

The crew then attempted to manually start the pumps to right the rig but there were no manuals on board explaining how the ballast control system worked. Knowledge had been passed from one crew rotation to the next by word of mouth. Instead of emptying the ballast tank on the side where the rig was listing, the men pumped in more water, increasing the list to about 15 degrees.

Their fate was sealed. The *Ocean Ranger* radioed it was abandoning ship. Rescue attempts by helicopter and the attending supply ship, *Seaforth Highlander*, were hampered by the storm and cold water and a lifeboat capsized when desperate crew members tried to climb a rescue line thrown to them from the supply ship.

The *Seaforth Highlander* then launched its own large inflatable life raft, but it floated away just out of reach of the drowning men. At 3.38 am on 15 February, the rig capsized and sank to the floor of the Grand Banks. All 84 hands aboard the *Ocean Ranger* perished.

A Canadian Royal Commission spent two years looking into the disaster and its recommendations had a major impact on design, construction and safety procedures for the offshore oil and gas industry.



It's not all work and no play at sea. When Wanda finishes work there is plenty of time to enjoy the delights of the music room and the canteen.



*“Every time I look out over the blue waters
I smile and think ‘Dad this one is for you!’”*





the devastation that I felt when I heard about it on the radio. Our school held a memorial assembly to honour the men. The students in Grades 3, 4 and 5 placed a yellow cardboard flame each with a name atop of a green cardboard candle, one for every man lost, on the front wall of our gym.

“I wanted so much to take part in that activity but I was only in Grade 2 so I sat in the gym, watched and cried for all the boys and girls who lost their daddies. To me, they were and still are heroes.”

The memories came flooding back last year when she first started to work offshore. “We were headed for White Rose on the helicopter and it was so exciting to be part of this new industry and at the same time I thought ‘the *Ocean Ranger* is down there,’ ” she recalled. “And I said a quick prayer for the crew of the *Ocean Ranger* and asked them to watch over me and the rest of us while we are working out here.”

The start of Wanda’s offshore adventure was also a moment to remember her father. In one of the first emails she sent to her Husky colleagues in St John’s, the provincial capital of Newfoundland, she wrote: “Hi land-lovers. I am on board! As we sail towards the Grand Banks the waters are very calm and so is the office! It is so nice. There is not much movement just a very gentle sway. It is an experience that I will not forget.

“I am wearing my badge with a picture of my dad and I, taken when I was two years old. He loved being out on the water and could not get waves big enough for his liking. I just so wish he was still alive so that I could share my stories with him as I know he would be just as excited as I am. Every time I look out over the blue waters I smile and think ‘Dad this one is for you!’ ”

– Part of this story was extracted from a Husky publication



WHITE ROSE IN BLOOM

WITH OVER 20 years of experience in Canada’s offshore East Coast, Husky is well positioned to capitalise on the area’s rich reserves. Discovered in 1984, the White Rose offshore oil field is located in the Jeanne d’Arc Basin 350 kilometres east of St John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador.

The field contains an estimated 200 to 250 million barrels of recoverable oil. The first oil was extracted from White Rose in November 2005, marking the successful completion of the third offshore oil development on Canada’s East Coast.

Given the remote location and harsh environment, the cost of finding and extracting oil offshore is significantly higher than for a land-based operation and fields generally have to be much larger to be commercially viable.

That said, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador will produce nearly 50 per cent of Canada’s conventional light crude in 2006 from the three offshore oil fields currently in production (Hibernia, Terra Nova and White Rose).

White Rose was developed using the *SeaRose FPSO* (floating, production, storage and offloading) vessel constructed in South Korea. The *SeaRose FPSO* is 267 metres long and features a disconnectable turret that allows the vessel to change location in the event of an emergency.

