Hearing reveals confusion aboard Deepwater Horizon rig

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A joint hearing into the Gulf oil spill held by the US Coast Guard and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement continued in Houston, Texas, on Tuesday. The aim of the hearings is to discover the cause of the April 20 blowout on the Deepwater Horizon rig that claimed the lives of 11 workers and began the worst environmental disaster in US history.

Testimony given at the hearing has pointed to a situation on the Deepwater Horizon rig in which there was no clear authority on the rig itself, and confusion prevailed in both the run-up to the disaster and its aftermath. Contributing to the confusion aboard the rig was its dual command structure. When the rig was in motion, or in the event of an emergency, it was under the leadership of its captain. While stationary and drilling, the rig was under the command of a Transocean manager. The rig was owned and operated by Transocean, but was leased to BP who owned the Macondo well itself.

Paul Johnson, a manager for Transocean who oversaw the Deepwater Horizon from Houston, was questioned by Coast Guard Captain Hung Nguyen during the hearing on the chain of command on the rig. Asked by Nguyen if he knew who was in charge on the rig, Johnson could only reply, “I’m not sure.” “I never gave it much thought,” Johnson said of the importance of knowing who was in command during an emergency, “It never occurred to me to ask.”

When asked by Nguyen if an improper transfer of command would “be a contributing cause to the tragedy,” Johnson admitted, “Do I think a bad handover could cause confusion? Yes, I would.”

On Tuesday, Transocean senior manager Daun Winslow continued testimony that had begun on Monday. On the day of the April 20 blowout, Winslow had gone to visit the Deepwater Horizon rig as a guest with a tour group of Transocean managers.

Winslow told the committee he noticed confusion among workers in the rig’s drilling shack, where a pressure test of the Macondo well was under way, upon his visit there. “It appeared there was some confusion about pressures or volumes circulated around that time, and I heard the word negative test.” He added, “I thought it was not a good environment to have a tour group there.” Winslow left Transocean manager Jimmy Harrell behind with the workers to investigate, and Harrell later gave Winslow a “thumbs up,” indicating any concerns had been resolved. Hours later, the explosion occurred.

Following the explosion, Winslow, as the high-ranking Transocean executive on board the rig, was, in his own words, “apparently” in charge, even though he was not officially within the chain of command. Winslow testified that the rig’s captain, Curt Kuchta, began to look to him for leadership. Winslow testified that he had to tell Kuchta to deploy lifeboats and to initiate the separation of the rig from the blown-out well.

The day after the explosion, having evacuated from the rig, Winslow found himself directing firefighting efforts. “We did not have a plan to put the fire out,” he told the committee. Winslow testified that he was warned by an official with a firefighting team that he was forcing too much water onto the rig, threatening its collapse, after which he began redirecting the use of water for cooling purposes only and not for the extinguishing of the fire.

The Transocean manager also attempted to address the failed blowout preventer atop the Macondo well. He boarded a ship armed with underwater robotic vehicles in an attempt to activate the failed shear rams on the

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preventer in the hopes of closing off the well, but was unsuccessful. His efforts were further complicated when instructions sent from shore could not be handled by his email service. “The files were too large to email. They were trying to break them down into smaller packages,” said Winslow.

The picture that emerges from the hearings being conducted in Houston is one of extreme incompetence and negligence on the part of Transocean. Aboard the Deepwater Horizon rig, one hand almost literally did not know what the other was doing. With the rig in crisis and lives in jeopardy, urgent decisions including the emergency disconnect of the rig from the well were left up in the air and delayed. There is increasing evidence that the chain of events taking place in the immediate aftermath of the April 20 blowout significantly compounded the severity of the disaster.

The hearings in Houston are expected to continue throughout the week with employees of both Transocean and BP scheduled to testify.

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