

Bodies of five workers recovered at site of Oklahoma gas well blast

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24 January 2018

Rescue workers recovered the bodies of five workers Tuesday afternoon from the ruins of a gas drilling rig that exploded in eastern Oklahoma Monday morning. Family and friends of the men, who had initially been declared “missing” after the blast and ensuing fires, kept vigil through the long hours of the night and the next day before receiving the devastating news about their loved ones.

Well control experts and firefighters put out the gas-fueled blazes late Monday evening, and once the drilling rig was stabilized and the area had cooled down, Pittsburg County emergency responders and employees from the state medical examiner’s office were able to gain entry to the wreckage. Within two hours they located the remains of the deceased men.

The victims ranged from new floor hands to veteran oil and gas workers. They were identified as: Josh Ray, 35, of Fort Worth, Texas; Matt Smith, 29, of McAlester, Oklahoma; Cody Risk, 26, of Wellington, Colorado; Parker Waldrige, 60, of Crescent, Oklahoma; and Roger Cunningham, 55, of Seminole, Oklahoma.

The gas rig, known as Patterson 219, was located near Quinton, Oklahoma, about 100 miles southeast of Tulsa, and was reportedly jointly operated by Oklahoma City-based Red Mountain Energy and Houston-based Patterson UTI Drilling. The crew had drilled down to 13,000 feet on the way to 17,000 feet, company officials said, when disaster struck.

Although state and federal officials are still investigating the cause of Monday’s explosion, an initial report by the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, which regulates the state’s oil and gas operations, said there was an uncontrolled release of gas that caught fire. It added that a worker at the scene tried unsuccessfully to shut down the well.

There were 22 workers on the site at the time of the explosion, officials say. Seventeen were able to escape, with one flown by helicopter to the hospital with minor burn injuries. The five others were unaccounted for.

Pittsburg County Sheriff Chris Morris said, “The bodies were located in the area where they were presumed to be working in, what they call the ‘dog house.’” He was referring to a steel-sided room near the rig floor that serves as an office for the drilling crew.

A portrait of the victims emerged through postings on social media. Cody Risk, the youngest worker and the father of a young son and two daughters, had just started as a floor hand at Patterson UTI on January 8, according to his Facebook page. He had formerly been a motorman at Nabors Industries and a frac operator at Halliburton Energy Services, Inc.

KOTV reporter Tess Maune said she was told by acquaintances of 29-year-old Matt Smith that he was “quiet, kind and hard-working.” She added, “He was a good husband... and a great dad to a little boy, not even 2 years old. Matt grew up in Savanna, Oklahoma and he married the love of his life eight years ago. The two settled down in McAlester to grow their family. He’d worked in the oilfield for several years. Before he left his house Monday morning to head back to Patterson Rig 219, he gave his wife and son a kiss goodbye... not knowing he’d never make it back home.”

Josh Ray, 35, was a husband and father of a young daughter. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Nikki Emmanuel, whose husband worked with Ray in the oil fields for six years. “He was a devoted father and husband who loved his job,” Nikki said.

“As a wife of an oilfield worker,” she continued, “it’s hard and takes a toll emotionally. You never know if it’s that last kiss, the last hug or the last ‘I love you,’

or if it's the last text, call or smile. When he walks out that door my heart beats a little differently until the day he comes back home."

Oil and gas rig workers are subjected to long and grueling schedules away from home, known as "hitches," which usually involve 14 straight days of work, 12 hours a day, followed by 14 days off, Nikki said.

"The missed birthdays, holidays, children's plays or sports—you definitely can't put into words what these men miss out on. They face dangers everyday they step on location—slips, trips, falls down to gearing up for safety to be on location. One thing for sure, it takes a strong man and a huge heart to be an oilfield worker... we don't get to live our lives by days, we live them by hitches!" she said.

The companies attract workers, including soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, by paying more than most employers. The lowest position, a floor hand, starts at \$76,000 a year, Nikki said.

"When on hitch, they live in crew houses with the other men. It's just like being at home. They cook, clean, work—just without their families. Those men were family and, yes, it's a very rewarding job as far as money, but it's emotionally draining for the families at home."

Along with Halliburton, Patterson UTI is one of the largest and most profitable oil and gas industry equipment and service businesses, with analysts expecting growing annual earnings of more than 11 percent for the next five years. With oil selling at \$64 a barrel, up from \$29 in January 2016, the number of oil and gas wells being drilled increased by 62 percent in the second quarter of 2017 from the same period the year before.

At the same time, however, corporations are strictly containing costs in order to maximize profits, opening the way for a higher rate of exploitation of workers and more dangerous working conditions.

At a press conference Tuesday, Andy Hendricks, CEO of Patterson UTI, said, "Like you, the public and the media, we want to know what caused this horrible event, but today is not the time for those questions, at least not from me." Hendricks added that the company has had safety violations over its years of operation across the country, but he said the record would show that it is one of the safest companies in the industry.

World Socialist Web Site reported yesterday over the past several years, the company has been cited by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for dozens of safety violations.

In January of 2012, a North Carolina worker was killed in a boiler explosion on a Patterson-operated rig. In 2011, workers in New Mexico and Texas died after being struck by equipment, with the worker in Texas falling 26 feet to his death. In 2006 in Oklahoma, two workers were injured and another killed when they were crushed by falling drilling equipment. The company was given a \$5,000 fine for the worker's death.



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