

# Rig Survivor Blames BP's 'Screwed-Up Plan' for Gulf Oil Blowout

*By Laurel Brubaker Calkins - Aug 24, 2010 12:00 AM ET Tue Aug 24 04:00:48 GMT 2010*

Aug. 24 (Bloomberg) -- BP Plc's "screwed-up" well design caused the Gulf of Mexico explosion that killed 11 workers and created the worst oil spill in U.S. history, according to Buddy Trahan, a Transocean Ltd. rig supervisor who barely survived the disaster. Bloomberg's Megan Hughes reports. (Source: Bloomberg)

BP Plc's "screwed-up" well design caused the Gulf of Mexico explosion that killed 11 workers and created the worst oil spill in U.S. history, a Transocean Ltd. rig supervisor who barely survived the disaster says.

In his first interview since the accident, Buddy Trahan, 43, said the crew and equipment on the Transocean Deepwater Horizon leased by BP were blameless, and that no one raised safety concerns when he and BP executives visited the rig on April 20. Hours later, the well erupted in a conflagration that almost killed him.

It was BP's responsibility to design a safe, efficient plan for drilling to a subsurface depth of more than 18,000 feet in Gulf waters a mile deep, Trahan said. Transocean met its responsibility to provide a well-equipped rig and trained crew to carry out BP's design, he said.

"The more I learn about this well, the madder I get," Trahan said in the interview at his lawyer's office in Houston. "It is pretty clear to me now it was a screwed-up plan."

The initial explosion hurled him 30 feet through a wall, burning most of the clothing off his back in an instant, Trahan said. He regained consciousness just in time to get the attention of someone running by. Senior tool pusher Randy Ezell dug him from beneath the rubble and yanked away a steel door whose hinge was stuck in Trahan's neck a half-inch from his carotid artery.

'We Lost Everybody'

Rig workers Stan Cardin and Chad Murray strapped Trahan to a stretcher and kept him from slipping into shock as they maneuvered him into a lifeboat and then into a helicopter that evacuated him to shore. Trahan suffered 12 broken bones and was bleeding heavily from second-degree burns and gashes, including a 9-inch, bone-deep slash across his left thigh and a fist-sized hole in his neck.

"While I was laying on the stretcher, I could see the rig floor engulfed in flames, and that's when I knew we lost everybody on the rig floor, including three who were dear to me," Trahan said.

“I didn’t know through all of this whether I was going to make it,” he said. “I could hear people talking about how badly I was hurt -- ‘look at his leg, look at the hole in his neck’ -- and all I could think about was my kids.” Trahan and his wife have three children, 9, 14 and 17 years old.

Trahan last week sued BP, Halliburton Co.’s Halliburton Energy Services and the other contractors on the well, known as the Macondo, for negligence and “willful, wanton and outrageous conduct.” Halliburton provided cementing services for the well.

#### Rig Record

Trahan hasn’t sued Geneva-based Transocean, which continues to pay his salary and medical expenses that he says have topped \$1.5 million.

In the interview, he ticked off perceived flaws in the well design on his scarred fingers: Using foam cement in a high- pressure gas well, failing to employ a safer casing type, installing inadequate centralizers to insure the wall was properly cemented, and failing to test the well’s integrity before removing heavy drilling mud that was containing the pressure.

“I’ve worked on jobs for BP, Chevron and Shell and I’ve never seen this combination of bad choices on any other well, ever,” he said.

The accident and resulting spill “had a number of potential causes, including the failure of equipment owned and maintained by Transocean,” Elizabeth Ashford, a BP spokeswoman, said in an e-mail. “But it does no good for anyone to speculate about what caused this accident. It is only through a careful examination of the evidence that we can learn the causes.”

#### Following Directions

Transocean spokesman Lou Colasuonno said in an e-mail that the “overall maintenance on board the Deepwater Horizon met or exceeded regulatory and industry standards,” and “was a key to the Deepwater Horizon logging seven consecutive years without a single lost time incident or major environmental event prior to the incident.”

Cathy Mann, a spokeswoman for Houston-based Halliburton, defended the company’s work on Macondo, saying the contractor carried out BP’s well design. At one point, Halliburton recommended 21 centralizers be used to center the well casing in the hole, reducing the risk of channels forming in the cement that would allow gas to flow.

BP decided to use six of the devices, according to a letter that U.S. Representatives Henry Waxman of California and Bart Stupak of Michigan sent to BP’s chief executive officer, Tony Hayward, in June.

“Halliburton raised concerns about the number of centralizers to be run and made recommendations regarding the cementing services provided,” Mann said in an e-mail. “However, ultimately, Halliburton acted on the decisions of and at the explicit direction of the well owner.”

## Exxon Differs

Trahan works at Transocean's Houston operations headquarters for the company's deep-water unit, Transocean Offshore Deepwater Drilling Inc. He oversees rig-equipment maintenance, long-term repairs and supplies, and isn't in the chain of command that interacts with customers about well design. He says he has pieced together his conclusion from testimony at public hearings and from documents BP, Transocean and other companies have turned over to Congress.

Exxon Mobil Corp. CEO Rex Tillerson told the House Energy Committee on June 15 that Exxon wouldn't have used the well design, cement mixture or testing procedures BP employed at the Macondo well. Royal Dutch Shell Plc's U.S. president, Marvin Odum, and Chevron Corp. CEO John Watson told the committee they wouldn't have drilled in the same manner as BP.

Hayward, testifying before the same Congressional committee on June 17, defended the design as in the best interests of the "long-term integrity of the well."

## Safety Reputation

"There are many wells in the Gulf of Mexico that have the same casing design," Hayward testified. "There are many wells that have been drilled with the same cement procedures."

Trahan has worked in the oil industry for 23 years, including 15 years on floating rigs in waters deeper than 3,000 feet. Raised in southern Louisiana's fishing and oilfield culture, where most jobs with decent wages were offshore, he got a job in rig maintenance right out of high school. Over time, he worked at almost every job on the rigs before being promoted to his onshore position.

The Deepwater Horizon had a reputation as one of the safest rigs working for London-based BP, Trahan said.

"Part of the purpose of our visit was to brag," he said of his April 20 trip to the Deepwater Horizon with another senior Transocean rig manager and two top BP drilling executives.

During the visit, one BP executive "talked about how, when BP talks about rig safety, the Deepwater Horizon is always at the top of their list," Trahan said.

## 'Good' Report

Trahan said BP is trying to deflect blame by saying the Deepwater Horizon was in poor condition. The rig has worked exclusively for BP in its 10-year life and was under contract to the oil company through 2013.

"BP was ready to continue using the rig," Trahan said. "So why are they kicking up dirt now?"

The night of the blast, the visiting executives mostly discussed the rig's long-range plans, according to Trahan. At one point, he said, the executives asked Don Vidrine, one of BP's two "company men" on the Deepwater Horizon, how the well was wrapping up.

"Vidrine said, 'Good,'" Trahan said. "If there were problems, they never brought it up, and they definitely had time. I had no idea what was fixing to happen." Vidrine has declined requests to testify on the disaster, citing illness.

Trahan, who spent almost a month in hospitals, began walking with the aid of a walker two weeks ago, and faces years of surgery and rehabilitation to regain full mobility.

He says he wonders if he'll ever be able to return to the floating behemoths that have been his professional home most of his adult life.

"Before this, I never had any doubts about my safety while I was out there," Trahan said. "This never should've happened like this."