



ROCKY III

In the 1950's there were two well known U.S. boxers, Marciano and Graziano, both with the nickname Rocky. Inspired by these two, a youngster from Stavanger also spoke with his fists in and after school. This gave him a nickname that still follows the active oil pioneer. Meet Rolf "Rocky" Øverland (65).



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The last members of the Norwegian Petroleum Pioneer Club are quickly approaching retirement. Membership is offered only to those who worked in the oil business before 31. December 1970. After that early production started from the Ekofisk field and then one is no longer regarded as a pioneer, but as a veteran, and this is quite another matter. Among the hard core of 134 members, ancient oil history becomes even more golden as years go by. One of the members contributing actively to this glorification is Rolf Øverland, who after 43 years in the oil industry is generally still only known as "Rocky".

Rookie

Rolf Øverland was trained a motor mechanic, and had just finished with the military. The year was 1966 and an ad from ODECO was looking for people from the Norwegian merchant navy or industry to work on the oil platforms in the North Sea. He was not included in the first group, but at the next crossroads he was summoned.

"My English was poor and I had to have a translator. ODECO wanted people in the control centre of the rig and asked if I knew how to operate hydraulics, valves and radio systems. As a motor mechanic I had some background, including the installation of car radios. Curiously enough I was offered the job at NOK 12.50 per hour, altogether NOK 36,000 a year, with a week on and a week free. I accepted a job on the rig "Ocean Traveller."

The job implied a maritime education and I was a rookie, knowing nothing about the pumps and ballast systems. Radio experience meant keeping in touch with Rogaland Radio and VHF during the evening and at night after the radio officer had left work. Fortunately, I shared a rig cabin with Ordin Lima, a skipper from the shipping company

Bergesen who had moved up from deck boy and wanted to be more at home with his family. He taught me everything on board, and without him, I probably would have been sent quickly ashore again," says Øverland.

Incidents and accidents

In the first few years there were few safety regulations and Øverland experienced many incidents and accidents. Five or six times the rig was evacuated due to poor weather, or because it took in water or lost anchor chains. There were cracks and damage on the rig, which meant more trips to the Rosenberg Shipyard for overhaul. As part of the key staff Øverland had to be on board while the others were evacuated.

"People were often poorly treated. Beards were banned and a guy who would not shave went right on land again, because the bosses "could not see his facial expressions." Americans never tolerated communist goods. Asparagus and mushroom from communist countries such as Taiwan or China were thrown overboard. The same fate suffered lamb meat for preparation of the traditional Norwegian course "fårikål". "No goats on our rig", shouted the Americans.

ODECO controlled everything and sensitive communication went over "SSB" (Single Page Band) directly to the owner, and not through the usual channels. One time the rig

had to return to the shipyard, due to leak in one of the pontoons. In the ballast tank Lima and I heard water dripping, and we discovered a 6-7 meter long crack where it leaked in water. Had this crack been allowed to develop while in operation at sea, we would probably have capsized! At the time we had, among other things, regular fishing boats functioning as stand by vessels. During a heavy storm I had contact with the vessel sometime late in the night. Some hours later the boat with the three onboard was seen floating with the keel in the air. I never saw any newspaper report about the accident. Several times the workers on the drill floor had broken hands and had fingers cut off. It was a tough time," says Øverland.

To South Africa

Øverland did not participate in the Ekofisk discovery with "Ocean Viking" in autumn of 1969. The rig he was working on, "Ocean Traveller", had only made small discoveries of oil and gas and was on its way to new missions outside South Africa.

"The journey from Rosenberg Yard to Port Elisabeth took 89 days. The three British tug boats, each of 3500 HP, had constant machine troubles and at the Equator, all three were hanging behind the rig. Wind power alone drove the rig southwards. Outside Angola, we were assisted by one of the ➤



world's largest tug boats, and from there the journey went smoothly. In the three months the trip lasted we also had some pleasant experiences. Using potatoes and sugar "borrowed" from the cook, we produced liquor for personal consumption. In Cape Town it took the agent two weeks to collect the 14 Norwegians and ship dog Smokey for further transport to Port Elisabeth where we should live. I was just married and I and my wife moved to South Africa for the two years the job lasted. I earned NOK 70,000 tax free a year and an unexpected death promoted me to Barge Engineer with the duty of 7 on 7 of instead of 14 on and 7 of. It gave my wife and me the opportunity to explore this wonderful country. For a Norwegian, Apartheid was a tough experience and business-wise there was no success, because the rig only drilled "dusters" along the entire coast from Cape of Good Hope to the Mozambique frontier. Along the way we lost three men, two South Africans and a Norwegian, in various accidents. After two years, the rig was brought back to Europe and this time the tow only lasted for 67 days, first to Scotland, and then back to Norway," says Øverland.

Service company employee

In the autumn 1971 times were good and Øverland got job in BJ Services. He soon experienced the difference between oil company employees and service company representatives.

"There were no working hour's regulations. We had to pack up and leave on one hour's notice and we never knew how long we had to stay in the North Sea. One trip was planned for 14 days, but became 29 days. One time I had just arrived home and I was summoned to the phone and had fly out again, this time for 31 days. In 60 days I was home four hours! In the long periods we had to wait on the rig or platform for those who solved problems in the queue ahead of us. Service companies' employees were less worthy. I have stayed on 18-person cabins where service people came and went at all times of the day. Sometimes when the rig was full we had to lie in the laundry room. Buzzing drying machines are not the worst. When the washing machine periodically stops, and turns the other way, it is almost impossible to sleep.

I was lucky to be at home during my first child's birth. Number two was a little different. Even knowing that the birth was imminent I was not allowed by my boss to stay home, I just had to pack up and go. After a week onboard I learned that I had a son three days ago, but only after 10 days I could go home.

Often when I was alone during critical pump works, it was impossible to relieve myself. Then I used the displacement on the cement unit tank and pumped away. In this way I contributed to a liter or two of oil in another million years," laughs Øverland.

Rising in the system

Rolf Øverland went ashore for good in 1979. By then he had personally had two experiences with a potential fatal outcome. During a mini blow out on the Valhall and the drill floor was set ablaze, he and a handful others stayed on the rig while the rest evacuated to Ekofisk. Under the tow of the "Ocean Traveler" from South Africa back to the North Sea, he was swept off the helicopter deck by the personnel basket ran by an inattentive crane operator. He managed to grip the basket and hung 45 meters above the sea, until he was hoisted up on deck again.

BJ Services wanted Norwegians to rise in the system and Øverland was well liked. His youth nickname had attached both offshore and onshore. Few knew his full name, but everyone knew Rocky. Until 1999, he was operations manager, with responsibility for 15 rigs and 150 employees. He was offered the job as CEO, but without any financial background, he knew his limitations.

"In these years QA and HSE systems came in full, and the responsibilities thus became tougher. I wanted to go offshore again, but was set to participate in sales and marketing department. I'm a social guy and it has worked well, but over the years the tendering processes become ever more frenzied. In addition, we were asked to reduce the price of already signed contracts," says Øverland.

Become operator employed!

Would he have done anything differently? In hindsight Øverland says that he would have begun in an oil company in the 1970s.

"Employees of the oil companies have wonderful welfare agreements, working conditions and early retirement packages. The service industry is far behind. Apart from this, I'm happy with life. I have two adult children and three grandchildren, and have been married the same fantastic wife all the time! Ball play has always interested me. In 2001, I had to give up football, but started with golf at a mature age and I have a 26.5 handicap, well enough to play on most courses in the world. I still have my offshore certificates, ready to go out again. Though, I've probably realised that at 65 year old, regardless of good form, one can hardly re-live the good old days. After all, I started in the industry when the rigs were "made of wood and the people of iron". Now it is perhaps the other way round," says Rolf "Rocky" Øverland. ■

