

May 18, 2010

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Blast Survivors Kept Isolated On Gulf For Hours

by JOSEPH SHAPIRO

Second in a two-part report.



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May 10, 2010

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In the aftermath of last month's explosion of an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, all the survivors wanted to do was get to dry land and call their loved ones. Yet for more than 24 hours, they were told to stay on ships on the water.

One reason was that the Coast Guard wanted to get information about the explosions on the rig and what caused them. And the company that owned the oil rig Deepwater Horizon also wanted answers.

Coast Guard officers boarded the supply boat, the Damon Bankston, soon after it picked up survivors, including Deepwater Horizon crew member Christopher Choy, from the Gulf of Mexico. The Coast Guard wanted to know what



PBS

"It shouldn't count, because I'd been up for almost 40 hours ... and just gone through hell," Choy says about the waiver he signed at Transocean's insistence.

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caused the explosion, and the officers wanted witness statements.

Choy, a young roustabout on the rig, was handed a form to fill out, asking what he'd seen. "They came on there, and they gathered everybody in the galley on the boat and handed out ... papers and stuff saying, '[These are] statements. You need to sign these. Nobody's getting off here until we get one from everybody.' "

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But when Choy read the Coast Guard form, he didn't like what he saw. "At the bottom, it said something about, like, you know, this can be used as evidence in court and all that. I told them, I'm not signing it," Choy says. "Most of the people signed it and filled them out. I just didn't feel comfortable doing it." Choy shared his story at length with NPR and the PBS program *NewsHour*, in one of the most extensive interviews from a survivor of the April 20 rig blast.

The Coast Guard acknowledges it kept the men on the water in part so its investigators could get statements. But Choy says he thought the man who gave him the form said he was a lawyer with BP, the oil company.

BP says it had no investigators or lawyers there.

Choy didn't sign the Coast Guard form. But he'd come to regret that he didn't refuse the next time he was asked to sign something.

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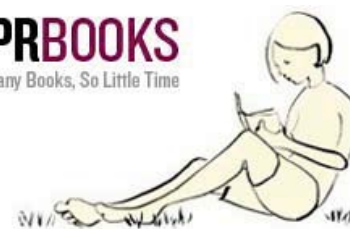
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He says he was desperate to see his wife. Choy, who's 23, and Monica, who's 19, were married last October.

Tracking Down Choy

Monica first learned about the explosion from a phone call from an eyewitness — Choy's stepfather. He worked on another rig 30 miles away from the Deepwater Horizon. "And the first thing he asked is, 'Please don't tell me that's the Horizon,' and he said, 'Because that's my son. My son's on that Horizon.' And you know, they told him that it was. And he just came in a panic." He called Monica with the news.

Monica would spend the next 12 hours waiting to hear if her husband was dead or alive. She repeatedly called a number for Transocean, Choy's employer, and the owner of the rig. When someone finally called her back, they could only say that her husband was on a list of the survivors.

That wasn't good enough for Monica, at home in Houston.

"I've never been on a plane before," she says. But she took a cab to the airport because she was too upset to drive. She'd never taken a cab before, either. She took the quick 45-minute flight to New Orleans. "It scared me, but I didn't care at the time," she says.

By the time she got to the hotel in Louisiana, Choy was still on the boat.

"That's all everybody on the boat kept talking about — was, man, I wish they'd just let me call me wife. I wish they would just let me call my wife so she could know I'm OK," Choy says.

He wouldn't get onto land until about 28 hours after the explosion on the oil rig. Then someone handed him a cell phone, and for the first time he had a minute to call Monica to say he was safe.



Enlarge

Ben Sklar for NPR

Choy, here with his wife, Monica, says he is angry that the waiver he signed relinquishes the oil company from responsibility, when responsibility on the oil rig was what the company stressed to its workers.

Two hours later, Choy was escorted to a nearby hotel where his wife waited in the lobby. "It was a lot like the day we got married," Choy says of seeing his wife's smiling face at that moment. "She smiled at first, and then it went to tears. And I thought she was going to choke me by hugging me."

Says Monica, "I just didn't want to let go. You know, I just wanted to stay there and just hold him."

'It Shouldn't Count'

But before they could go home, there was one more form and one more attempt to get the survivors to give information. At the hotel, there were representatives for Transocean who asked

Choy to initial a line that said: *I was not injured as a result of the incident or evacuation.*

Choy had seen men with open wounds and burning flesh. He knew 11 of his friends were dead. He felt he was among the lucky ones.

Exhausted and just wanting to get home with Monica, he signed.

That angers his attorney, Steve Gordon of Houston.

"And that's how they treat them? It's absurd. It's unacceptable, and it's irresponsible," Gordon says. "Criminals get a chance to talk to a lawyer. They purposely kept them away from the public."

Gordon says Choy can't go back to his old job on the rig. He's being treated for nightmares and flashbacks.

And when Choy sued his employer, Transocean wrote back and said: But you signed that form. You said you weren't injured.

Choy's angry, too, that it's being held against him.



Enlarge Ben Sklar for NPR

Choy's attorney, Steve Gordon, says the former roustabout can't go back to his old job on the rig because he's being treated for nightmares and flashbacks.

"It shouldn't count, because I'd been up for almost 40 hours ... and just gone through hell," Choy says. "And they want to throw papers in my face for me to sign to take them, you know, out of their responsibility.

"That's one of the things they preached to us the entire time you work there and do any kind of training, is be responsible. That's part of their core values, is responsibility. And then, the first thing they threw at me when I get to the hotel, you know, is a paper relieving them of their responsibility," Choy says.

Transocean says it's focused on the oil spill cleanup and it can't comment on lawsuits.

Choy says the company now has a responsibility to him: To help him get medical treatment to deal with his constant memories of the sounds, smells and sights of the fire and death of that night at sea.

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pat blake (pym) wrote:

And not only is BP responsible, but they lied and their only concern was getting people to sign something. And Choy was traumatized by the event, whether people want to accept this or not, think how you'd feel if you saw your co-workers killed or injured and you were kept awake for nearly two days. You might sign anything. In fact, I'd say his signing it indicated he wasn't in his right mind or he just wanted to get home.

Wednesday, May 12, 2010 04:20:47

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dsm dsm (dsm67) wrote:

When he initialed that line he was thinking clearly. He knew what was important. People were dead, yet he was alive. People were seriously injured and he was unharmed. Corporate lawyers knew the minute he set foot on dry land he would be assailed by an ambulance chasing lawyer -- and oh look, he was! Now he is blinded with dollar signs. Be an honorable man Choy. Thank God you are alive and live the rest of your life with a clear conscience.

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 23:41:52

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Phil Jones (zzzzzzzzzz) wrote:

Did anybody mention that there was a Coast Guard questionnaire with the same questions? It's only when NPR carries on a masquerade of reading the ambulance chasers version of events verbatim and calling it "reporting" that intelligent listeners become aware of NPR's failings.

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 23:03:48

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Charles Brown (Charles) wrote:


It only occurred to me at the end of this lengthy story, that apparently Chris Choy's only injuries are his complaints of nightmares, etc. And that Choy was the only person interviewed who was physically unharmed and yet who was complaining about having signed the statement as to his having no injuries.

I also did not understand; has a lawsuit already been filed on Choy's behalf? If so, that was FAST! It is usually several weeks or months before a lawsuit like this filed post-injury. Does anybody really know at all whether Chris Choy has any long-term injuries? Would any clinical psychologist or psychiatrist opine that Chris Choy is now disabled and cannot go back to work, just a couple of weeks after the incident? Surely not; that's not enough time to establish any real psychotherapy, presuming that Choy needs it.

The reporter did not indicate how much money Chris Choy wants in this lawsuit. Choy's wife was interviewed; is she also a Plaintiff, under the theory that her husband's injuries, such as they are, have damaged her as well?

This was as completely one-sided as I can imagine any story. I am not sure that if the Plaintiff attorney himself had written it, that it could have been more one-sided.

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 16:42:57

[Recommend \(4\)](#) 


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jonathan Scott (lyrr) wrote:

Corporate Scumbags with their greasy hands in everything. No surprise here, as Robers and Alitos court gives more and more power to corporate America it is We The People that suffer!

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 12:43:58

[Recommend \(10\)](#) 

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Patricia Dunn (Trisha) wrote:

It is good to see that there are real countrymen in the US, except of course for the first five commentators. What is justice is BP (the company in charge of oil production on the rig Deepwater Horizon) and Transocean (owner of the Deepwater Horizon rig leased to BP) bearing the burden of their responsibility to the workers and their families. Then there is the insult of oil on the shores of the Gulf Coast killing not only wildlife, but the fishing industry which will affect more families not just now but for years to come.

And at the same time inspection of all the rigs under US jurisdiction to ensure they meet proper safety and operating standards.

Oh, I read that BP's CEO earned \$6 million in 2009. And in 2008 the CEO earned \$13 million. Wonder what the CEO of BP will make this year? Do you think BP's CEO's sign any waivers? If they did, this would work: "If anyone is killed and/or injured as a result of your negligent management you forego your annual salary."

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 11:09:05

[Recommend \(13\)](#) 

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Howard James (bioresearcher) wrote:

I assume that this is the same Coast Guard that claimed no oil was leaking until NOAA published satellite images of the spil.

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 10:45:45

[Recommend \(6\)](#) ↑

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Margaret Leafe (poetmaggie) wrote:

if he can afford a good lawyer he might do something about the waver, but sleep depredation is the most common form of torture and used by all the authorities even in the US. They want the answers they want to hear, example it was the crew that made the mistake and they want freedom from paying for the problem, example wavers. We live in an evil society Greed rules

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 10:01:07

[Recommend \(15\)](#) ↑

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Richard Tator (Kcirtap) wrote:

i guess we dont have to worry about them terrorist oil countries in the middle east/asia, laAmerica has its own..

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 08:55:09

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I AM (Bob_Marley) wrote:

I'd like to hear from those who say unions are of no good, and try to apply that logic to this situation.

I GUARANTEE, if these guys were unionized. They would've been afforded an advocate to speak to before being forced to sign ANYTHING.

And I GUARANTEE any safety lapses at this oil rig would've been at the very least, in a filed grievance, for all to see, pending a resolution.

Instead we have only have the good word of BP telling us just how safe their operations were. Any testimony to the contrary from here on out, will be dismissed as the words of "disgruntled former employees" looking for a payday.

For all of union's faults, they DO force employers into accountability better than any under funded, under manned, government regulator, such as the EPA, OSHA, DEC, etc.

Lets hope someone steps up for these oil rig workers as a loud, and powerful advocate. Otherwise it's just them *vs* an army of Philadelphia lawyers.

Tuesday, May 11, 2010 02:28:19

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