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REFLEX MARINE TAKES A FRESH LOOK AT EVACUATION AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Reflex Marine, a global specialist in the safe transfer of personnel by crane, believes that recent changes in the energy industry suggests that the time could now be right for operators to reconsider their emergency evacuation options. New equipment and improved practices could provide greater flexibility in dealing with a wide range of threatening scenarios.

Reflex Marine CEO, Philip Strong, made the comments ahead of the company's presentation at the North Sea Offshore Crane & Lifting Conference, taking place in Aberdeen, UK on 27 April. Mr Strong advised that in the UKCS and elsewhere, the role of crane transfer to affect rapid and secure 'dry evacuations' to the safe haven of an attending vessel, has become a 'forgotten option'.

This is in contrast with areas such as Canada, where crane based evacuation is given 'risk based priority' over lifeboats and other means. A crucial fact, that has been widely overlooked, is that many lives, arguably hundreds, have been saved by crane based evacuation over the decades. A poignant recent example was in 2001 when damage due to an explosion threatened the Brazilian floating production vessel P-36. The operator, Petrobras, evacuated 138 of their crew by crane, and another 24 via helicopter, before the vessel finally sank.

In the early days of the European offshore industry, personnel transfer by crane gained a negative image with local operators. The perception of risk was often distorted, however, a lack of focus and investment in this area added strongly to these negative perceptions. In the North Sea, personnel transfer by crane was not adopted as a solution for routine logistical operations, understandably given the long distances to offshore installations and issues of comfort whilst sailing in Northern climes.

However, it is regrettable that the position on logistical transfers so strongly coloured views on the role of personnel transfers for emergency situations. According to Mr Strong, discarding the use of personnel transfer by crane for emergency provisions is the equivalent of discarding the use of lifeboats for emergencies, on the basis that they are not considered to be a safe, nor practical means of offshore commuting. When faced with an emergency, it is essential to weigh-up the risks involved in the escape against the alternatives, which include other means of escape or 'staying put'.

The case to reconsider the role of the crane in emergencies is also supported by the evolution of equipment and best practice over the past decade, which has 'radically improved the safety of crane based personnel transfer operations. Indeed, a number of 'blue chip operators' around the globe are now switching from helicopters to marine based crew logistics using cranes, on the basis that it provides a lower risk solution.

Evacuation is rarely a simple operation. Each method has its own advantages and limitations, depending on a wide range of emergency scenarios. Offshore personnel and managers need a range of reliable options to help deal with variety of difficult situations. The helicopter is an established method of moving personnel and limited special training is required for evacuating crews. However, a mobilisation from shore takes time and passenger capacity is limited. Helicopters are also vulnerable to platform hazards, such as fire, and adverse weather conditions. Lifeboats offer an immediately deployable option to evacuate entire crews, but the operation is non-reversible and history suggests that launch and recovery operations are not without risk.

Evacuation to a vessel by crane can offer a flexible, low risk, reversible and dry solution and is an option that is immediately available under the Offshore Installation Manager's (OIMs) control. However, the option relies on the provision of a useable crane and a suitable vessel within proximity.

In many cases, such as for the stricken P-36 installation, the use of multiple methods provides the best solution. For example, evacuations can be initiated at the early stage of a developing incident, possibly before helicopters have been mobilised. The OIM's challenge is often to evacuate the largest number of personnel, in the shortest possible time, which may demand a multi-faceted approach.

If personnel transfer by crane is to establish itself as an emergency response option, it is important that it is given full consideration in planning and preparation. This means considering the whole system; vessels, cranes, transfer devices as well as crew competencies and training requirements. In Canada, which performs personnel transfer by crane to vessels on a routine basis, operators have developed 'best in class' solutions to ensure operational integrity. This provides excellent scope to implement simple improvements to existing evacuation provisions, which require minimal investment. For an industry serious about its obligations for the safety of its offshore workers, this is positive news and a real opportunity for early progress.

ENDS

Relevant Notes:

Reflex Marine is currently in dialogue with a number of industry and government bodies about the scope for improving evacuation options.

Relevant legislation UK HSE – PFEER for offshore installations

Prevention of Fire and Explosion, and Emergency Response, Regulations 1995:

Regulation 5 = assessment; Identification of events requiring Emergency Response, evaluation of likelihood and consequences, selection of measures, establishment of performance standards.

Regulation 15: evacuation; the duty holder shall make arrangements to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the safe evacuation of all persons to a place of safety

Regulation 16: Escape ; The duty holder shall provide such means as will ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the safe escape of all persons from the installation in case arrangements for evacuation fail.

Definitions

Evacuation refers to the planned and controlled method of leaving the installation without directly entering the sea. Means of evacuation offer protection from the hazard and have their own motive power to enable persons to move quickly from the installation.

Escape means the process of leaving the installation in an emergency when the evacuation system has failed; it may involve entering the sea directly and is a 'last resort' method of getting persons off the installation

Notes to editors

Reflex Marine is dedicated to the transfer of personnel to and from offshore installations and vessels. It aims to set new standards and expectations for the industry, changing the perspective of crew transfer from being seen as an inherently high risk activity, to being accepted as a manageable activity that can be performed safely and cost effectively. After a comprehensive risk review with industry operators and rigorous testing and verification, Reflex Marine launched in 1995 a marine transfer capsule, called the Frog. This transfer capsule addresses all the key risks associated with crane based personnel transfer. However, the company sees its role going beyond the technicalities of the product. Its objective is to provide comprehensive solutions to heighten safety awareness and to protect the industry's personnel. To find out more, visit www.reflexmarine.com

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