

Oil and Water: Video catches supervisors dumping oil in Gulf

“AT ONE POINT I WAS THINKING IN MY HEAD, ‘WHAT AM I DOING? THIS IS CRAZY. BUT I HAVE TO DO IT. IF I DON’T RECORD THIS, NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW,’” HOWINGTON RECALLED.

David Hammer

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HOUSTON — Evan Howington held his cellphone furtively in his lap and hit "record" on the video camera. He couldn't believe what he was witnessing, but he also couldn't let his supervisors on the Uncle John oil rig see the shock on his face or the camera app activated on his phone.

That's because his supervisors, including the highest-ranking official on the rig, were knowingly opening a valve on an oil pipeline 1,500 feet below, releasing hydrocarbons and chemicals directly into the Gulf of Mexico, 60 miles off the southeast Louisiana coast.

"At one point I was thinking in my head, 'What am I doing? This is crazy. But I have to do it. If I don't record this, no one will ever know,'" Howington recalled.

"What Evan did was incredibly brave," said Raleigh Hoke of the Gulf Restoration Network, a leading watchdog of offshore oil and gas operations. "I mean, he put his livelihood and his future on the line to hold this company accountable."

Howington's video was used by federal prosecutors to convict Houston-based Walter Oil & Gas Corp. earlier this year of a felony for failing to report an illegal discharge.

But the evidence, which Hoke and other environmentalists call some of the most damning and detailed they've ever seen, appears to show this was more than the typical failure to report pollution. The video shows representatives from Walter and its contractors, Helix Canyon Offshore and Cal Dive International, joking about breaking the law and discussing how to cover it up in their official activity reports.

The video also shines a bright light on an ongoing cavalier attitude toward the environment. The dumping took

place April 1, 2014, four years after a massive BP oil spill was supposed to have served as a wake-up call and changed the culture in the industry.

A single felony charge against Walter Oil & Gas and a \$400,000 fine served as punishment for what Howington said were repeated violations during his entire 24-day hitch on board the Uncle John.

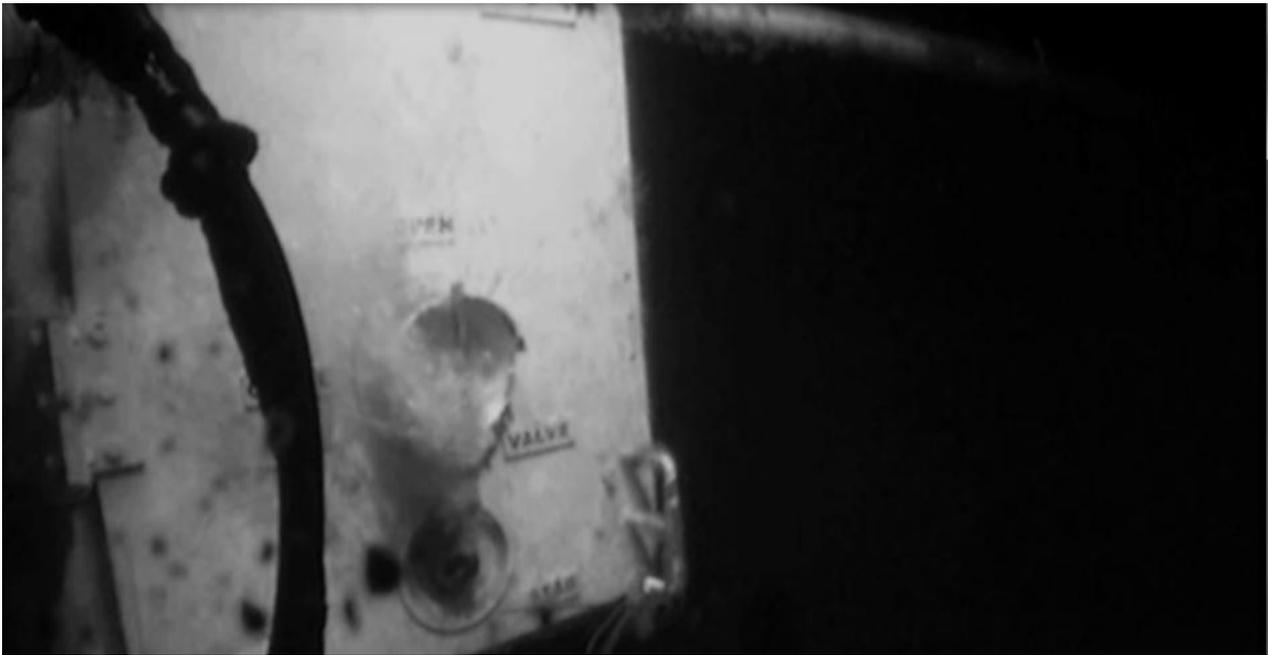
Serving his first stint as an operator of Remotely Operated Vehicles, or ROVs, unmanned robot submarines used for maintenance on deepwater wells and pipelines, Howington got nowhere reporting leaking hydraulic oil to his supervisor.

"I remember his response very clearly," Howington said. "It was, 'Oh, it's just Tellus 32 (hydraulic oil). Don't worry about it.' So I was kind of shocked. I was like, 'What?' "

Four days later, on March 31, 2014, the crew and supervisors on the Uncle John rig had an accident as they tried to clean out a connecting pipe so they could remove it and fix a plug that had built up and impeded oil flow in the main pipeline. About 64 gallons of chemical leaked from a bladder they were using to empty the connecting pipe, called a jumper.



Evan Howington: "I remember his response very clearly. It was, 'Oh, it's just Tellus 32 (hydraulic oil). Don't worry about it.' So I was kind of shocked. I was like, 'What?' " (Photo: WWL)



<http://imgur.com/8G2HRCM>

They failed to report that to federal authorities, as required by law, according to federal court documents.

But the next morning, the crew went a step further. The bladder they were using to remove the oil and chemicals inside the jumper wasn't working. The jumper was shut off at both ends, but every time they thought they had emptied it, the pressure readings built right back up to show it was full again.

Early on April 1, supervisors ordered one of Howington's colleagues to simply open the valve and let the material in the jumper flow into the open sea. The robot arm on the ROV slowly turned a lever clockwise and a black cloud billowed out.

The discharge quickly obscured the lens of the camera on the ROV and oily brown residue dripped on the color monitor in the Uncle John's control room, but black-and-white cameras mounted on the side of the ROV continued to capture the gusher for nearly 90 minutes.

A few times during the first 20 minutes, Howington had to hide his camera phone in the pouch of his hooded sweatshirt, but he kept it recording.

"In my eyes, if you don't stand up to the criminals when you know they're doing something wrong, you might as well be a criminal yourself because you're letting them do it," he said.

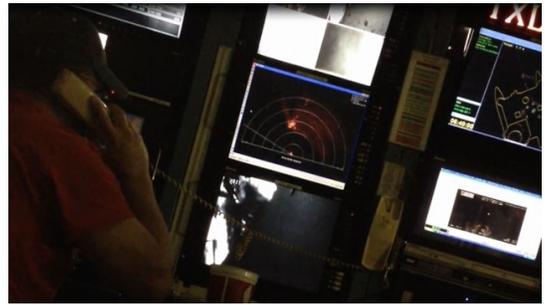
The audio is at least as shocking as the video.

"Lights out!" says David Thibodaux, an independent contractor who served as Walter's rig boss — a position known as the "company man."

"Yeah, that's nothing harmful there," says a Cal Dive employee Howington knows simply as "Mongo."

"No, that's inhibitor," Thibodaux says as the crew laughs.

Court documents state the discharge was hydrate inhibitor, a toxic mix of chemicals used to prevent hydrate crystals from forming and blocking the oil flow. It's illegal to release that substance into the Gulf, but the video captures the crew commenting on how dark the discharge is and that probably it's actually oil.



A screenshot from Howington's video showing the release. (Photo: WWL-TV)

At one point, Thibodaux tells the crew, "As far as everybody is concerned, that is chemical on there; there is no oil," as he makes slashing motions with his hands.

Shortly after that, Rod Heckle, the superintendent for Canyon Offshore, is heard saying, "No, we didn't see anything."

"As a matter of fact, all I did was put 'relieve pressure.' I didn't put nothing about ...," Thibodaux says. "On my report, that's exactly what I put. Yeah, I know how to word that (expletive)."

At another point in Howington's video, Thibodaux suggests it would have been better to have done the operation under the cover of darkness.

"Like y'all, that (expletive) makes me nervous," Thibodaux says. "You know what I'm saying. (Expletive). I'd much rather do this like about 3 o'clock last night."

WWL-TV attempted to reach Thibodaux through social media and messages left with his current employer but did not receive a response.

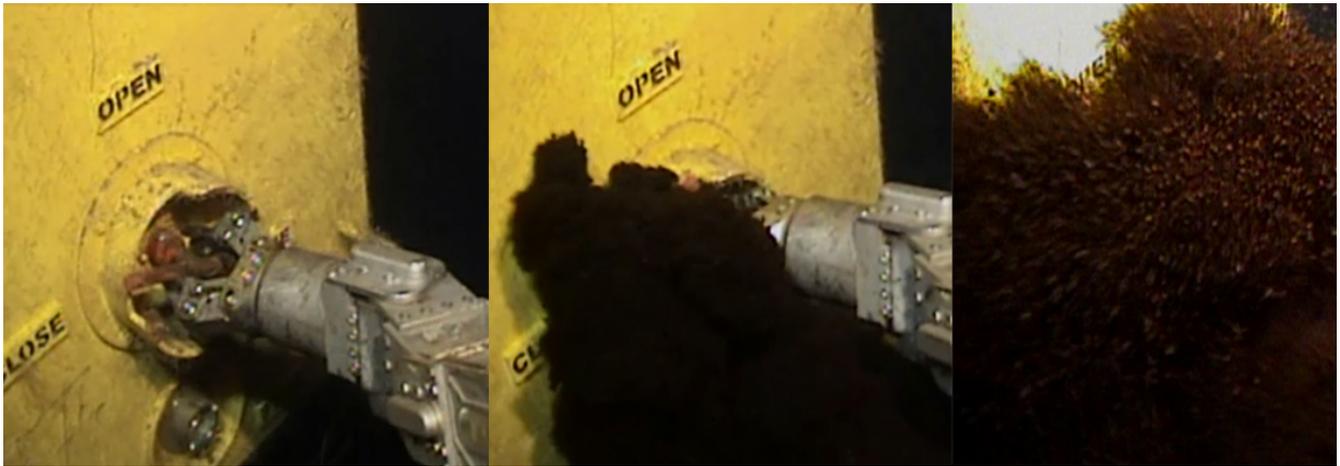
Helix Energy Services Group, the parent company of Canyon Offshore, did not respond to requests for comment about its employees' involvement.

Cal Dive International is in bankruptcy, and messages left with its attorney in New York were not returned.

Walter Oil and Gas, the only entity charged with a crime in the incident, said in a written statement to WWL-TV that it didn't learn about what happened on March 31 and April 1, 2014, until the Justice Department notified it in August of that year. From that point on, the statement said, Walter cooperated with authorities.

"While no Walter employees were directly involved in this incident, Walter has taken responsibility for it and implemented corrective actions to prevent similar incidents in the future," the company said.

The statement said Walter has a good environmental record over 35 years operating in the Gulf and has invested in safety and environmental compliance training for employees and contractors.



<http://imgur.com/ZTgcmOG>

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