



‘It’s like being an astronaut and going out to another planet.’

Survival training, a 2 week on-2 week off schedule and fire alarms going off in the night are all part of working life for Celerant Consultants Maxime Brichet, Pierre-Marie Derouin, Pedro Hernandez and Adrian Trenerry on a multi platform programme in the North Sea.

Before you can go offshore you have to take a 3 day survival course in Aberdeen to get a certificate and if you don’t get the certificate, you can’t go. In those 3 days you learn about first aid and how to escape from an underwater cockpit, which is very challenging.

They run 7 different training scenarios and before you’re even allowed into the helicopter simulator you have to spend a lot of time in the water in your life jacket, learning how to move with all that equipment on. Everyone is then given a rebreather, which is basically a plastic bag, and you blow air into that and then you can breathe through it for up to 30 seconds. You go down under the water with the rebreather for 30 seconds or so and when you’ve proved you can do that, you get strapped into a seat on the helicopter simulator.

There are 4 of you in the helicopter simulator and in the first scenario they lower you into the water, but you don’t go all the way under. Then they dump you in sitting the right way up. You do one escape without the rebreather, then one with the rebreather. They tell you to count to 7 on your first escape because there’s air in your suit and you might struggle to get out if that isn’t released. Most people count a very fast 7 seconds. The worst scenario is when they dump you underwater, upside down with no rebreather. Your nose and mouth fill with water and because you might be sitting on the opposite side of the helicopter to where you normally sit, you’re escaping upside down, in the opposite direction. So there’s a lot of coughing and spluttering when you hit the surface.

Flying out to the big blue

The first 5 minutes in a helicopter are exciting, but then you notice that all the crew from the rig crew are sleeping. They’ve done this dozens of times and they know that the smart thing to do is to get some sleep. It takes about an hour to get out to the various platforms and the helicopter makes a lot of noise, so you have to wear ear plugs. At the beginning of the flight you look outside to see the sea, but after a while you don’t bother anymore because it’s always the sea.



‘It’s not easy to just step outside for a break, you have to check the weather first.’



It can be really windy on the trips and it’s not easy to land in those conditions, even though the pilots are very experienced. Sometimes you can’t even see where you’re landing because you’re in the middle of the helicopter and nothing really prepares you for being there the first time. When you do touch down on the helipad its right at the top of the platform. So your first impression is: This is a very big platform - and very small helipad.

You look around and you’re surprised by how many other platforms you can see. The closest one might be only a few miles away and there are always others on the horizon.

Everything in the offshore industry is driven by safety, so sometimes when you’re booked on a flight to go out, you get bumped off because there’s a greater need for electricians or maintenance people. Consultants aren’t considered core crew. Or if you’re booked to come back and there’s a medical emergency on another platform, they always go there first and then continue onshore. So sometimes you can be in the air a very long time.

Groundhog Day?

You work solidly for 2 weeks out on a platform, so it’s easy to lose your sense of time because every day is pretty much the same. You have the same meetings at the same time and the same fixed hours for breakfast, lunch and dinner. One of the crew said ‘Every day is Monday here’ and that feels true. You also lose your sense of space because you live in a very small world. Your time is split between your cabin and your desk and that can be only 3 or 4 floors apart. You can’t always go outside if you want to either. You have to check that

the weather’s OK first and you have to wear your PPE protection helmet, glasses and so on, so it’s not easy to just step outside for a break. At the beginning it’s a strange life, but you get used to it. It’s a bit like a military life.

2 Consultants rotate on each platform, one offshore, one onshore and our job is to help the crew improve all aspects of their operation. A working day usually starts around 5 or 6am, but if for example you have to attend a maintenance shift changeover meeting, you’ve got to wake up at 4.30am. You’ve also got to manage some logistical issues. You share a cabin with a member of the crew, so if your roommate also has to get up you’ve got to decide who takes the first shower.

We finish about 9pm in the evening and go to bed around 10pm. There aren’t many things to do anyway. Most of the crew on the rig work 7am till 7pm. Then they go to the gym or the lounge to watch a movie. There’s a cliché about platforms where you think that you’re going to meet plenty of tough guys, but people are actually very normal. It’s a high pressure, demanding environment, but most of the workers have a family and that’s their focus back on shore.

One of the big things about change management out here is that the crew is constantly changing, so you have to repeat and repeat and repeat to make change happen. You have to constantly check that people understand what you’re trying to achieve because even if you design something with your colleague, when the change over happens you have to convince the new person that this was the right thing to do. Depending on what shift pattern people are on there are times when you don’t see some crew members

for 8 weeks. Obviously your back-to-back is seeing them, but you yourself don’t. So when people come back from their break they have to understand the new ways of working that have been implemented while they’ve been away. You have to get them thinking not just about their tour of duty, but the next crew and the crew after that.

4.10am: General Platform Alarm

There’s a safety drill every week where you practice going to your muster stations or your lifeboats, depending on what scenario they want to run. On one platform recently the wind was blowing in one particular direction and it blew exhaust fumes from the turbines into a room with a smoke detector. So at 4.10am it set off a general platform alarm and that meant everyone had to go to their muster stations until the source of the alarm had been checked. You’re lying there half awake and you hear this really loud buzzing and you think that’s not my alarm - then you realise what it is and scramble to get your protective clothes on. No matter how fast you are though the Offshore Installation Manager is always faster. They get to the Control Room really quickly to take charge of a situation like that.

It’s a unique experience being out on an offshore platform and you need a special mindset to be involved in projects like this. It’s a tough environment. You don’t have any intimacy and you have to share everything. When you first board that helicopter in your life jacket you feel a bit like Bruce Willis in the movie ‘Armageddon.’ It’s like being an astronaut and going out to another planet. You can communicate through the internet or a phone call, but nobody can call you. So you have tremendous respect for the client crew who do this for a living. They are special people. ■

