



Things that could only happen to Peck.

Eugene Island 175 Fire

I was a 22-year-old roustabout working Summers in the offshore oil field in the Gulf of Mexico while attending college in Mississippi. On one of my many jobs offshore I was on a Shell production platform, about 50 miles from land, working as a welder's-helper. One morning I boarded a crewboat along with a Shell foreman, three welders, three helpers and two Shell roustabouts to go over to another production platform and do some welding.

This platform, Eugene Island 175, serviced several oil wells and stored up to 10,000 barrels of oil in tanks on the installation. The installation had been pumping oil from another platform into the tanks of 175 but failed to realize that the tanks were full and had overflowed, covering the entire platform with oil. Not a good situation when one is doing hot work. The toolpusher ordered the roustabouts and welder's-helpers to start washing down the platform with the fire hoses. So, we started spraying water with the fire hoses all over the platform trying to clean the oil off. We did this for several hours until the toolpusher told us that we had to get the welding done before the barge comes.

The welder I was working with was a Cajun named Ernest Boudreaux. Boudreaux started his welding machine and struck the first arc, but we didn't know that the toolpusher was draining oil down into the water from the overflow trays of the tanks, so the water beneath the platform was covered in oil. When the hot metal slag from Boudreaux's welding rod hit the surface of the water the oil ignited in a heated blaze, filling the air with thick, black smoke and huge flames.

The toolpusher yelled, "I gotta go shut that valve off," and ran upstairs to the top deck where the tanks were located. Boudreaux followed him upstairs. Everybody else was on the second deck about 90-feet above the water. Covered

in smoke and feeling the heat of the fire, I couldn't see which way to go to follow Boudreaux. Just then I heard the other welders and helpers screaming, "JUMP! JUMP!" So, I just turned around and started running through the smoke toward the edge of the platform. I knew about where the handrails were and knew that I had to jump high in order to clear them. Blinded, I leaped as high and far as I could through the smoke.

When I broke out of the smoke while falling to the water about 90-feet below, I was amazed that I made it over the handrail, but when I looked down the crewboat was below me and I thought, "I'm going to hit the crew boat." I didn't. I missed it by about 5-feet. When I hit the water, I looked up at the top of the platform which had a crane on top of it and the fire was above the derrick of the Crane.

I started swimming towards the crewboat hoping to get pulled aboard. The deckhand on the boat had an axe and was chopping the rope tethering the vessel to the platform, as fire was now coming over the stern. When he got the ropes cut, the boat started pulling out and I didn't have time to get onboard, so I grabbed the airplane tires on the side of the boat, used for cushioning when docked. The boat pulled away at full-throttle, dragging me and almost drowning me in its wake.

The crewboat pulled away from the fire, and deckhands threw an emergency cork raft from the top of the boat to me in the water; exhausted, I climbed aboard. Two Shell guys were hanging on to a life ring about 50-yards away. They were up on top of the tanks washing oil when the fire was started, and I'm not sure how they got to that life ring, but they were calling for me to come get them. Filled with adrenaline, I started paddling towards them.

In the meantime, the crewboat circles around and I see one of the other welder's-helpers, Carl, dive off of the crewboat and begin swimming back to the burning platform with a life jacket on his shoulder. Something was splashing in the burning water. My first thought was that it was a fish, but reasoned that since Carl was swimming toward it, the splash had to be a person. By now, Carl was right next to the fire and he called for me to come over to him. As I got closer, I realized that it was Boudreaux who was splashing. Boudreaux had jumped off the top of the platform and was on fire when he jumped. Carl and I put the lifejacket on Boudreaux and tied it to the side of the raft.

In trying to paddle away from the flames, I realized that when I paddled over to the platform I was going with the current, and when we started to paddle away into the current we were not making any headway at all. Oil was still draining out of the tanks and the fire underneath the platform was intense and growing larger. I remember us splashing water on our faces because it was super hot being so close to the fire. Because we were not making any headway against the current, I told Carl that we have to get in the water and side-stroke, dragging the raft and Boudreaux away from the raging fire.

Another of my great ideas that didn't work. Not only were we not making any progress, but the current was pushing us back into the inferno. I really didn't think we were going to survive, so I said goodbye to my mother and my father and I promised to God, "If you get me out of this, I won't smoke, drink or do anything bad ever again." A promise, that regrettably, I was unable to keep after the event.

Then, out of nowhere, I heard the whoosh of whirling blades, and I see a helicopter coming in low on the water. The helicopter pilot had a toolpusher with him from a nearby drilling rig. They saw the fire and came to investigate. The pilot landed the helicopter on the water just away from the fire and hovered there, trying to blow the fire away from us so he could get in closer. The toolpusher had crawled out onto the pontoon, and the helicopter maneuvered close enough for the toolpusher to grab Carl's hand and pull him onto the pontoon of the chopper. Then the pilot moved the helicopter back in to get me. I grabbed the life raft and Boudreaux with one hand and I grabbed the toolpusher's hand with the other. When the helicopter started pulling away, my shoulders were about to pull out of socket. My hand slipped out of the toolpusher's hand and the helicopter pulled away. I'm thinking, "Please come back and get me." The helicopter made a 180-degree slow turn and came in for another pass. This time I grabbed the toolpusher's hand very tight. When I met him several weeks later, he told that I had really have a good grip. I replied, "You would have had to cut my hand off to get me to let go."

Carl and I pulled Boudreau onto the helicopter pontoon, trying to get Boudreaux into the helicopter. Carl grabbed Boudreau's leg to lift him up and the skin came off his leg. The gob of flesh looked like a jellyfish in Carl's hand. Boudreaux was burnt really bad. His eyes looked like fried eggs and he had on a welder's leather sleeve and his leather belt, but all of his clothes were burned off. Finally, we managed to get Boudreaux into the helicopter and we took off. I felt an amazing sense of relief to be in the air and looking down at that burning oil platform that we were leaving behind. Boudreau had a Catholic necklace around his neck and he was holding the necklace, praying. Carl and I were trying to comfort him the best that we could. It was then that Boudreaux uttered the words that were to haunt me for a very long time, "Please let me die."

The helicopter needed fuel, so we stopped at another platform for gas and then we flew into Morgan City where Carl and I were admitted to the hospital. Boudreaux was flown to the Baton Rouge Burn Hospital. Carl and I stayed in the hospital overnight, but we didn't have a scratch on us. While I was in the hospital, one of the rig hands, Mike, came to see me. Just the day before the fire, as we were painting the railings on the top deck of another platform, we were talking about how much I would charge to jump 100 feet down to the water. We agreed that \$50 would be a fair price. I told him from my hospital bed that he owed me fifty bucks, but I never did collect. I often wonder whatever became of Mike, and really, all of the hands on the platform that day.

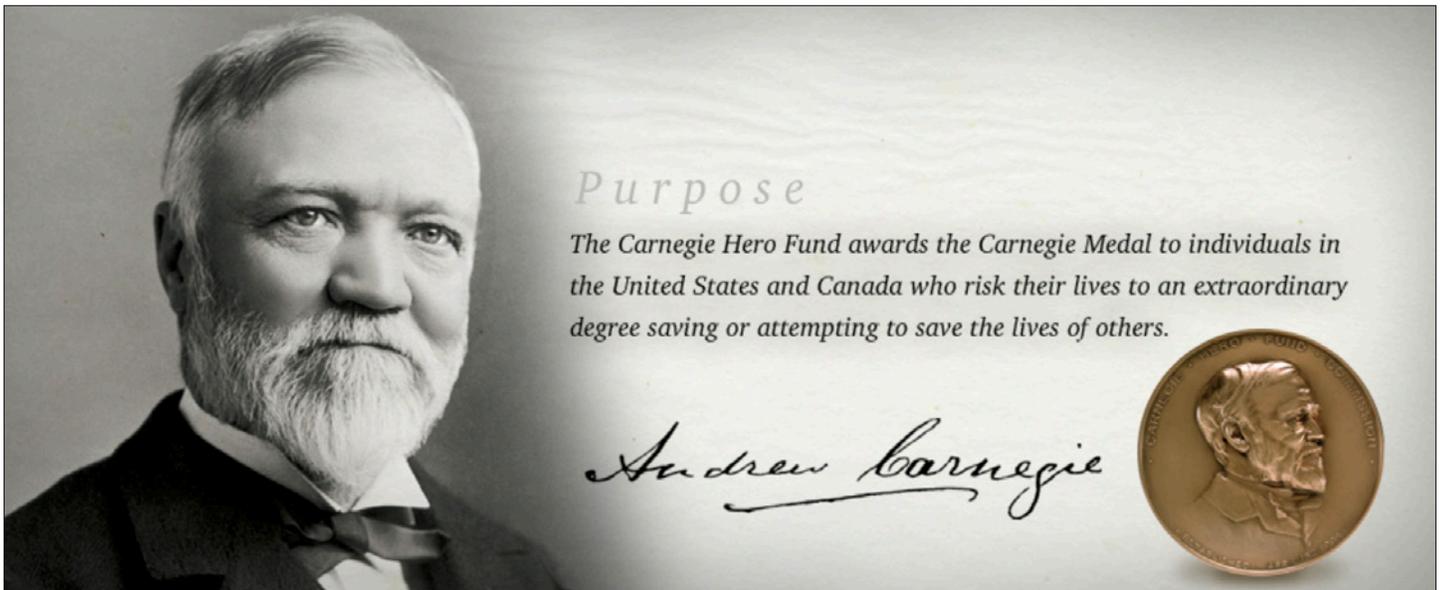


The fire from the water shot up past the crane derrick on the top floor.

A couple of weeks later I went to see Boudreaux in the Baton Rouge Burn Hospital. I'm glad his eyes were covered so he couldn't see the shocked expression on my face as I entered his room. Boudreaux looked like a mummy. He was wrapped with gauze from head to toe and had a straw in his mouth. He never gained consciousness while I sat by his bed praying and thinking about what we had both been through. He was a good man. Tears streaming down my face, I made the drive back to New Orleans. Boudreaux only lived another 30-days.



Several months later I got the opportunity to go overseas on a seismograph boat. I had been overseas for about one year when my mother sent me a letter telling me that I had been awarded the Carnegie Hero Medal. Shell Oil had sent a story with my name, the pilot's name, the tool pusher who was riding with the pilot, and Carl to the Carnegie Hero Foundation. We all got awarded bronze medals for our actions in saving the welder Boudreaux, and of course, the helicopter pilot and the toolpusher for saving me and Carl. A silver medal is awarded if somebody dies trying to save a person, and I'm glad I didn't get that. We also got a cash award of \$750.00, a lot of money at the time for a student working a summer job.



Aftermath Eugene Island 175

After the fire I wasn't anxious to go offshore again. So, the company I was working for that summer sent me to Colorado to work on a cabin that they were building for the owners of the company. I stayed in Boulder, Colorado for about three weeks working on this cabin, but I really wasn't making much money being a carpenter's helper. I went back to Morgan City and asked to go offshore again. Shell Oil considered me a good worker, so they sent me back offshore, but in a different area of the Gulf of Mexico.

I was soon dispatched to catch a crewboat going offshore one night. After a very rough four-hour boat ride, we arrived at the Shell Production platform in the Gulf about midnight, and the weather was terrible. It was storming, raining, lightning, and the seas were very rough. After what I went through the last time I went offshore I took note of which way the current was moving.

At the time, it was normal procedure when getting off a crewboat on offshore platforms—one had to swing on a rope over to a deck on the bottom of the platform. On that night it was an extra challenge because of the rough seas and the boat surging up and down with the waves. I had to take special care in swinging on the rope. After getting on the platform and going upstairs to the living quarters, they took me to the bunk house where I was supposed to sleep that night. It was after midnight by then, so I proceeded to go sleep. About an hour later a guy burst open the door and yells "Don't panic, but grab your life preserver, lightning just hit the flare!" I came tearing out of bed, grabbed a lifejacket, and ran out the bunkhouse to the nearest handrail. I had one leg over the handrail preparing to jump into the dark water.

Before I could get my other leg over the rail, a Shell guy grabbed my arm and said "Wait a minute boy! Where are you going? We got the fire out." So, he pulled me back and said, "Let's go get a cup of coffee." When we walked into the galley filled by other workers drinking coffee, the guy I was with said, "Y'all won't believe what this new roustabout was going to do. He was going to jump overboard before I stopped him."

I said, 'Let me tell you a story about the last time I was offshore,' and I explained to them why I was ready to jump so fast. If I had waited a few seconds the last time there was a fire, I would not be here today. The story produced a hearty laugh from the experienced crew, and a newfound respect for this redneck rookie roustabout.