



'It's impossible to put your finger on anything in this rescue mission. Anything.' Asbjørn Rislåa

Aug 21, 2020 09:09 CEST

## **West Gamma 30 years on: 'I was completely calm because they knew their job!'**

**While the 'Esvagt Omega' was saving the rig West Gamma's offshore workers from the waves, Asbjørn Rislåa was lying in the water and admiring the professional rescue team at work.**

With 23 years behind him in the merchant navy, Asbjørn Rislåa knew where the situation was heading on the night of August 21, 1990, when he learned that the rig's management had completed a council meeting after the rig had

started capsizing.

‘In my days as captain, I had myself been obliged to go through with ship council meetings in a few critical situations’, he says.

As a trained sea captain, he was among the more experienced offshore workers on the accommodation rig West Gamma. He had been on board the rig many times and had complete faith in the rig’s management – for this situation too.

But it was critical.

The rescue boats on the accommodation rig had been ripped off, the helideck wrecked, the wind and sea were creaking in the entire rig, and large amounts of water were filling up the decks faster than the pumps could handle. The fire alarm sounded multiple times, triggered by short circuits and a rain of sparks. When the engine room was under water at 3 at night, the rig’s captain ordered an evacuation.

### **They looked competent**

All wearing survival suits, Asbjørn Rislåa and the rest of the offshore workers reached the deck. The night was dark, and the helicopters’ projectors were shining at the deck and the frothing sea, where the rescue boats lay ready.

It happened that evacuations were Asbjørn Rislåa’s specialty: He had taught maritime sea rescue at the Kristiansand Maritime Schools, been seminar leader in sea rescue and been safety officer for Philips Petroleum.

Now theory was going to be put into practice in the shape of 16-metre high waves.

When he 30 years later is asked if he was nervous that night on the North Sea, the now 82-year-old sea captain laughs on the telephone from the town Vennesla outside of Kristiansand:

‘If I was nervous? Why would I be that?’, he asks:

‘There were three vessels with rescue boats ready to pick us up. After all, I could see that they were executing exactly what the theory recommends, by the book. ‘And they certainly looked competent’, he says.

### **Inspired respect**

The rig’s captain stood calm and composed and indicated when people were to jump into the water.

Asbjørn Rislåa was among the last to leave the rig. He could see the other passengers drift in bundles of five or six people towards the three awaiting rescue vessels, the ‘Normann Drott’, the ‘Esvagt Omega’ and the ‘Esvagt Protector’.

‘It looked like a textbook case. So I jumped into the water and let myself drift. I had a pleasant survival suit on, and I thought: It doesn’t get better than this! I felt completely safe because it was obvious that they knew their job’, says Asbjørn Rislåa.

He was picked up by one of the ‘Normann Drott’s rescue boats, but a high wave capsized the boat, and he fell once more into the sea together with 11 other people. When the ‘Normann Drott’ itself attempted to approach the capsized rescue boat to help, it scared the living daylights out of everybody in the water.

‘It was frightening to see the vessel’s aft end get closer. First buried in the frothing sea; the next moment elevated high up with spinning propellers’, Asbjørn Rislåa later wrote in his report.

### **Deserve distinction**

Another vessel attempted a similar action, which was just as terrifying:

‘We could see far underneath the vessel when it approached’, Asbjørn Rislåa wrote in his report about the incident.

The 12 people from the capsized rescue boat managed to wave off the large vessels. Instead, the ‘Esvagt Omega’s Fast Rescue Boat came to their rescue:

‘You could see that these Danish seamen were professional – even as we lay in the water. We were all impressed. We were on board the vessel in no time, where the crew grabbed a tight hold of us and welcomed us on board. Everything went impeccably’, says Asbjørn Rislåa.

In his report after the incident, he wrote:

‘I must here laud the Danish rescue crew. There is not the slightest they could have done better – from beginning to end. I hope they receive a distinction for their performance. They deserve it.

30 years later, Asbjørn Rislåa is as good as his praising word:

‘It was an absolutely remarkable performance through and through. It was a rescue mission that gave ESVAGT a great deal of respect in Norway’, he says – and then adds:

‘They truly deserved it!’

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In 2015, ESVAGT published this video about the West Gamma incident:



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

## About ESVAGT

ESVAGT is a dedicated provider of safety and support at sea and a market leader within offshore wind solutions.

We support the offshore Oil & Gas industries with a wide range of specialized services: Standby, Emergency Response and Rescue Vessels (ERRV), Oil spill response, Firefighting, Tanker assists, Rig moves, Supply services and Interfield transfer of cargo and personnel.

We service offshore wind farms and have a fleet of dedicated Service Operation Vessels (SOV), which ESVAGT pioneered in 2010. The SOVs provide accommodation for technicians, spare time facilities, offices and conference room, storage for small turbine parts, workshops, etc. The SOV offers flexible personnel and equipment transfer capabilities by either Walk-to-Work gangway system or Safe Transfer Boats.

ESVAGT was founded in 1981 and has a fleet of more than 40 vessels and approximately 1000 employees on- and offshore.

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