

The story of Kuwait's battle to extinguish its burning oil fields in the wake of Saddam's retreat at the end of the First Gulf War. Produced by English and Co, and currently installed in Kuwait City.

Heroes of Fire

OPENING CAPTION:

*'Every day I'm in that field, I find three or four new ways to die'.
Oil well fire fighter, 1991.*

PART 1: SETTING THE SCENE

COMMENTARY:

Hell.

A choking expanse of black smoke for a hundred miles and more.
No sun, no light.

As dark 'as the inside of a cow.'

788 oil wells destroyed.

613 wellheads belching bright orange flame, burning out of control...

Millions of barrels of oil, gushing from the ground every single day. Enough to keep the fires of hell raging for another fifty years.

Sara Akbar, of the Wild Well Killers:

'The more you went into the fields the darker it became...'

This was Kuwait in 1991 – victim of the worst act of environmental destruction in human history.

(PAUSE)

PART 2: THE EVALUATION

COMMENTARY:

They came first from Texas. Men who had fought fire all their lives; men who knew the risks.

Pat Campbell, of Wild Well Control:

'Even all of us that had worked on well fires and blowouts our whole life - no-one ever saw hundreds of wells burning at the same time...'

Red Adair, of Red Adair Service and Marine:

'When you first got in it was a heck of a bad looking site...'

At first, their experience told them it would take five to seven years to extinguish all the fires.

Five to seven years that would destroy 10 percent of Kuwait's oil reserves ...
Years of contaminated water...

... of choking black smoke and darkness...

Years of hell.

PART 3: THE MOBILIZATION

COMMENTARY:

Abdelrahman al-Awadi, Kuwaiti Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs:

'We are talking about an unprecedented ecological catastrophe the likes of which the world has never seen. We need the help of the whole world to cope with this...'

And the world responded with the largest non-military mobilisation in history.

The Kuwaiti Wild Well Killers astonished observers with their work rate and fearlessness...

Soon they were joined by Canadians, Hungarians, Britons, Chinese – men of every nationality that had ever known this kind of fire.

The kind of fire that could raise air temperatures so high that the sand melted into streams of flowing glass.

Bulldozers piled desert sand layer upon layer into blazing pools of oil. One road leading to every fire.

Now they needed water, to cool both men and equipment.

To get it, they reversed the flow of pipelines from the Arabian Gulf. Where crude oil once flowed to the sea, water now flowed in the opposite direction.

Millions of gallons, pumped in constant streams over every wellhead, every machine... and every worker.

Cooling them just enough to begin the task of removing twisted metal debris from around the well – so it was safer to start fighting the fire...

PART 4: FIGHTING THE FIRES

(RAISE THE SIX PLASMA SCREENS)

'The water keeps you from boiling inside your protective suit. You're sweating out more than a litre of water an hour, and the only shelter is a tin shed...'

COMMENTARY:

Tin absorbs heat – enough to provide a few moments’ relief. That was enough to keep the fuel tanks on the bulldozers from exploding.

There are many ways to kill an oil fire – and every fire is different.

You can ram steel tubes down through the flames and inject mud to block the gusher.

You can suspend a hollow tube to lift the flame up for a split second, and disconnect it from the oil.

Or you can pour in enough water to drown the flames – like the Hungarian team that mounted MIGjet engines on a Soviet tank to blast water at the fire.

But the most effective technique of all was pioneered in the Texan oilfields.

It works on the simple principle that fire needs oxygen to burn.

The one sure way to remove the oxygen– if only for a split second... is with an explosive charge.

(CO₂ CANNONS)

(THEATRICAL FIREBALLS EXPLODE)

PART 5: CAPPING THE WELLS

COMMENTARY:

With the fire extinguished, oil continued to spew from the earth at more than 1200 kilometers an hour. This was when the danger was at its greatest. A single spark...

... Could reignite the inferno.

Coots Matthews of Boots and Coots:

‘Most people don’t understand. Getting rid of the fire’s the easiest thing. You’ve got to cap the well cause it’s still blowing... And that’s where the work comes in.’

COMMENTARY:

Jet cutters blasted high pressure water and abrasive sand to saw through broken bolts and twisted pipes.

New well heads were cautiously manoeuvred over the pipe heads and clamped into place.

And the wells never stopped spewing crude - till the final bolts went home and the valves were closed.

Mike Foreman, of Boots and Coots:

'When you actually get the pleasure of shutting the blowout preventers in, it's the quietest quiet in the world. It's a very good feeling...'

(SILENCE)

PART 6: THE AFTERMATH

COMMENTARY:

613 burning wells, extinguished not in seven years, not in five – but in just nine months.

(LOWER PLASMA SCREENS)

An unimaginable ecological catastrophe had been averted, but now it was time to count the cost.

Wildlife habitats ruined. Livestock and bird populations decimated. Smoke inhalation. Burns....

... Seven fatalities.

But the end could have been much worse - without the courage of those who rose to meet the challenge....

The men and women, from Kuwait and around the world...

... Who risked everything to put out the fires of hell.

... The Heroes of Fire...

Sara Akbar:

'When asked if I look back at what happened... with regret and sadness, I say I do not have any regrets because we as Kuwaitis learnt much from that catastrophe. Every dark day has a bright side and we have to remember the bright side...'