

Red Adair, 1915-2004: He Put Out Dangerous Oil and Natural Gas Fires Around the World

His crews battled more than two thousand fires. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
21 March 2009

VOICE ONE:

This is Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:

And this is Faith Lapidus with People in America in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Red Adair. He was famous for putting out dangerous oil well fires around the world.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



Red Adair

Paul Neal Adair was born in Houston, Texas in nineteen fifteen. He was one of five sons of a metal worker. He also had three sisters. While growing up, he became known as Red Adair because his hair was bright red. The color became a trademark for Adair. He wore red clothes and red boots. He drove a red car, and his crew members used red trucks and red equipment.

As a young man, Red Adair dropped out of high school to help support his family. He worked as a laborer for several different companies. In nineteen thirty-eight, Adair got his first oil-related job with the Otis Pressure Control Company.

VOICE TWO:

During World War Two, Adair served on a trained army team that removed and destroyed bombs. After the war, he returned to Houston and took a job with Myron Kinley. At the time, Kinley was the leader in putting out fires in oil wells. Red Adair worked with Myron Kinley for fourteen years. But in nineteen fifty-nine, Adair started his own company.

During his thirty-six years in business, Red Adair and his crews battled more than two thousand fires all over the world. Some were on land. Others were on ocean oil-drilling structures. Some fires were in burning oil wells. Others were in natural gas wells.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Red Adair was a leader in a specialized and extremely dangerous profession. Putting out oil well fires can be difficult. This is because oil well fires are extinguished, or put out, at the wellhead just above ground. Normally, explosives are used to stop the fire from burning. The explosion robs the fire of oxygen. But, once the fire is out, the well still needs to be covered, or capped, to stop the flow of oil. This is the most dangerous part of the process. Any new heat or fire could cause the leaking well and the surrounding area to explode.

VOICE TWO:

Red Adair developed modern methods to extinguish and cover burning oil wells.

They became known in the industry as Wild Well Control techniques. In addition to explosives, the techniques involved large amounts of water and dirt. Adair also developed special equipment made of bronze metal to help extinguish oil well fires. The modern tools and his Wild Well Control techniques earned Red Adair and his crews the honor of being called the "best in the business."

Red Adair was known for not being afraid. He was also known for his sense of calm and safety. None of his workers were ever killed while putting out oil well or gas fires. He described his work this way: "It scares you -- all the noise, the rattling, the shaking. But the look on everyone's face, when you are finished and packing, it is the best smile in the world; and there is nobody hurt, and the well is under control."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

One of Red Adair's most important projects was in nineteen sixty-two. He and his crew put out a natural gas fire in the Sahara Desert in Algeria. The fire had been burning for six months. This famous fire was called the "Devil's Cigarette Lighter."

Fire from the natural gas well shot about one hundred forty meters into the air. The fire was so big that American astronaut John Glenn could see it from space as he orbited Earth.

The desert sand around the well had melted into glass from the extreme heat. News reports said Adair used about three hundred forty kilograms of nitroglycerine explosive material to pull the oxygen out of the fire.

VOICE TWO:

Adair's success with the "Devil's Cigarette Lighter" and earlier well fires captured the imagination of the American film industry. In nineteen sixty-eight, Hollywood made an action film called "Hellfighters." It was loosely based on

events in Red Adair's life. Actor John Wayne played an oil well firefighter from Houston, Texas whose life was similar to Adair's. Adair served as an advisor to Wayne while the film was being made. The two men became close friends. Adair said one of the best honors in the world was to have John Wayne play him in a movie.

Here is John Wayne in the film "Hellfighters." He has just flown into Venezuela to help his crew fight a dangerous fire. He has brought needed supplies with him.

JOE HORN: "Wooo. It's about time you got back to earning an honest living."

CHANCE BUCKMAN (JOHN WAYNE): "If you think I'm going to say it's a pleasure to be here, forget it."

GEORGE HARRIS: "Hi boss."

CHANCE BUCKMAN: "George, nice to see you. I spent a lot of your money."

GREG PARKER: "Well, what did you do, buy up all the control heads in Houston?"

CHANCE BUCKMAN: "This far away from supplies, you get all the spares you can."

GREG PARKER: "This is Colonel Valdez, Chance. He's in charge of keeping us from getting shot."

CHANCE BUCKMAN: "Well, I hope you do a good job, Colonel."

COLONEL VALDEZ: "If I do not, you will have my profound apologies."

(LAUGHTER)

JOE HORN: "The longer you guys stand there, the longer it's going to take to unload this thing."

CHANCE BUCKMAN: "Right Joe..."

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen eighty-eight, Adair fought what was possibly the world's worst off-shore accident. It was at the Piper Alpha drilling structure in the North Sea. Occidental Petroleum operated the structure off the coast of Scotland. The structure produced oil and gas from twenty-four wells.

One hundred sixty-seven men were killed when the structure exploded after a gas leak. Red Adair had to stop the fires and cap the wells. He faced winds blowing more than one hundred twenty kilometers an hour, and ocean waves at least twenty meters high.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

In March of nineteen ninety-one, Red Adair went to Kuwait following the Persian Gulf War. He and his crews were called in to help put out fires set by the Iraqi army as it fled from coalition forces. But Adair faced serious problems in putting out the fires. In June, he flew to Washington, D.C. to talk to government officials about those problems. He told congressional lawmakers that he needed more water and more equipment. He also described his concerns about medical services for his men, and the buried landmines throughout Kuwait.

VOICE ONE:

Adair also met with then-President George H.W. Bush. President Bush listened to his concerns and offered his support. Within weeks, Adair had the equipment he needed to complete the job.



An oil fire in Kuwait

The Red Adair Company capped more than one hundred wells. His crews were among twenty-seven teams from sixteen countries called in to fight the fires. The crews' efforts put out about seven hundred Kuwaiti fires. Their efforts saved millions of barrels of oil. Some experts say the operation also helped prevent an environmental tragedy.

The job had been expected to take three to five years. However, it was completed in just eight months. In a ceremony, the Emir of Kuwait extinguished the last burning well on November sixth, nineteen ninety-one.

In addition to Kuwait, Adair and his men carried out sixteen other jobs that year. They worked in India, Venezuela, Nigeria, the Gulf of Mexico and the United States.

Red Adair fighting the Piper Alpha fire off the northeast coast of Scotland

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Red Adair had spent his seventy-sixth birthday in Kuwait working side by side with his crew. When asked when he might retire, he told reporters: "Retire? I do not know what that word means. As long as a man is able to work, and he is productive out there and he feels good – keep at it."

Still, Red Adair finally did retire in nineteen ninety-four. At that time, he joked about where he would end up when he died. He said he hoped to be in Heaven. But he said this about Hell: "I have made a deal with the devil. He said he is going to give me an air-conditioned place when I go down there – if I go there – so I won't put all the fires out."

VOICE ONE:

Red Adair died in two thousand four. He was eighty-nine years old. At his funeral, many family members and friends honored him by wearing red clothes. Many Americans remember Red Adair for his bravery. He lived his life on the edge of danger. He was known for his willingness to risk his own life to save others.

During his life, Adair received Special Letters of Recognition from Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush. One of the letters said this: "You have served your country well by your willingness to do a dangerous and important job with a rare ability. In an age said to be without heroes, you are an authentic hero."

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This program was written by Jill Moss. It was produced by Lawan Davis. This is Faith Lapidus.

VOICE ONE:

And this is Steve Ember. Join us again next week for People in America in VOA Special English.