

Mark Childers awarded for service, innovation

MARK CHILDERS KNOWS he's a driller at heart. That's why in 1972, after a successful 6½-year career with **Humble Oil and Refining Co.** — now **Exxon-Mobil** — he jumped to the tougher end of the business by joining offshore drilling contractor **ODECO Drilling**.

Good thing he did, or the IADC would not have been able to name him the 2006 Contractor of the Year.

On 8 March, Mr Childers joined an illustrious list of industry leaders when he was presented with the award, which recognized him for an outstanding career with significant contributions to the contract drilling industry, service with IADC, and the promotion of safety and technical innovation and economic efficiency within the industry.

'IT SOUNDED LIKE FUN'

Mr Childers graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute — now Virginia Tech — with both a Bachelor's and a Master's in civil engineering. Although he had no idea what the oil and gas industry was about, other than "it sounded like fun," he now looks back on it as "one of the best thing I ever did."

Entering the industry when the offshore sector was still in its infancy made the early years of his career a fascinating ride, Mr Childers said.

"When I came into the industry in 1965, there were few standards," he recalled. "It was an exciting time because I got to help form many of the standards, procedures and rules we have now. I remember going to lunch with people and actually designing rig equipment on napkins. Then we'd go build it, and maybe in a month the item would be on a rig. The offshore industry was brand-new and often we were working from a blank sheet of paper with no prior history or experience to guide us. Problem-solving was a prerequisite to successfully moving forward. I really enjoyed the excitement, the hands-on experience and being part of something so new."

Mr Childers "really enjoys problem solving." For example, after joining **Atwood Oceanics** in 1999, he immediately took on the recurring challenge of keeping its submersible rig, the **Richmond**, on location through winter storms and hurricanes.

"I worked on this problem with some of my colleagues, and we came up with the



"The oil and gas business is truly interesting. Every day is a new day," said Mark Childers, General Manager - Technical Services for Atwood Oceanics. He recently won the Contractor of the Year Award.

concept of using suction piles to anchor the hull in place. The suction piles are carried on the hull and are installed on each of the 4 corners of the submersible. When the **Richmond** is rigged up with the mast and other equipment at the start of the well, the suction piles are installed, thus costing any rig time. The concept has worked beautifully. The **Richmond** has gone through 3 category 3-plus hurricanes with winds up to 142 mph and hasn't moved an inch. It's one of the most successful engineering efforts I've ever been a part of. Even **Doc Laborde** of **ODECO** wrote me and said, 'I can't believe it! Someone finally solved this problem!'"

STILL A DRILLER AT HEART

Mr Childers stayed at **ODECO** for 20 years, serving as chief engineer for 5 years and heading up Gulf of Mexico operations for 10 years. In 1992, **ODECO** was acquired by **Diamond Drilling**, and he was asked to join the new company, **Diamond Offshore Drilling**.

He subsequently worked briefly for **DI Industries** (now **Grey Wolf**), during which he quickly realized that "I'm not a land guy," Mr Childers went to **Oceaneering Production Systems (OPS)** for 4 years. OPS is a division of **Oceaneering International** that specializes in the conversion and operation of offshore drilling units and tankers into early production units.

But once again, he knew that at heart, he was still a driller.

So when **John Irwin**, President and CEO of **Atwood Oceanics**, called him up and asked if he was interested in getting back in the drilling business, Mr Childers immediately snatched up the chance.

Mr Childers currently serves as **Atwood's** General Manager—Technical Services. He's responsible for the purchasing, maintenance and equipment, and quality assurance departments. He also played a significant role in the company's water depth upgrades for the **Hunter** and **Eagle** rigs and in its advancements of the tender-assist drilling concept.

SERVICE WITH IADC

Mr Childers has always believed in the importance of supporting industry associations. Not only has he been an IADC member since 1982, he served on its Board of Directors from 1990-93 and from 1999 to the present. Additionally, he's an active member of the Society of Petroleum Engineers, SNAME, MTS, the American Petroleum Institute and more.

"We need industry organizations so everyone in the industry can talk to each other. In one way we're competitors, but in another way we need an organization that represents us to the public and to the governments. We need a way to speak to the world," he said.

At IADC, he helped found the Subsea Work Group. "Subsea equipment has always been the Achilles heel of floating rig operations. In the mid-'80s, the vendors were really struggling with related technical issues, and it was impacting the contractors significantly. So some of us at IADC stepped up and formed this group to help resolve some of the problem," he said.

He also helped plan the IADC Surface BOP Workshop for Floating Drilling Operations, held in 2002 and 2004. "SBOP — if it's misused — can lead to major problems. So we decided that we need to write some guidelines, and educate people about the SBOP concept," he said. "In the end, a manual on how to evaluate and use SBOP was published and is now available to the industry as a guide."

Mr Childers has served on the IADC/SPE Drilling Conference Program Committee since 2001 and most recently served as chairman of the 2006 IADC/SPE Drilling Conference.

"It was an extremely rewarding experience. It's a lot of work, if you want to do it right, but I met a lot of nice people and had a great time," he said. A self-described "hands-on" chairman, he is very proud of the helping to develop a computer program that makes rating paper submissions much easier.

"I think that was a major accomplishment. It'll be a lot easier for future chairmen and committee members," he said.

THE PEOPLE ISSUE

At the plenary sessions held during the recent Drilling Conference in Miami Beach, Fla., the pressing issue of "people" in the drilling industry was center stage, and Mr Childers couldn't agree more that it's the No. 1 issue this industry needs to focus on.

"We need to put serious thought into this issue today, not next week or next year. We need to do it now," he said

Part of the problem is the cycles of ups and downs that have plagued the industry. "We've got to make people look at this as a career, not a rodeo ride. When the earnings go down, we must handle it better than just cutting jobs," he said.

And where does the solution begin?

"With the operators," Mr Childers said. "The major operators have to become more involved in this industry. When I came into it, they were much more



Above, Mr Childers accepts the Contractor of the Year Award from ReedHycalog President John Deane at the awards luncheon held on 8 March at the Intercontinental Hotel in Houston. Below, Mr Childers is seen at the offices of Atwood Oceanics in Houston.



involved in the development and evolution of the drilling contractor industry, our people and how we trained them. Now they're not involved as much as they need to be to lead this industry, and that is a big mistake. They really need to fulfill their leadership capabilities much better."

The majors, as well as the rest of the industry, also need to step up in terms of improving the public's image of the whole oil and gas industry, he said.

"We've got to change this public misconception that we're low-tech, which we're not. The 'dirty old business' view, which we're not," he said. "The technologies we have in our industry are extremely high-end, but we do not tout it, and I'm not sure why. We need to put a lot more effort into public relations, and that needs to start with the oil companies. The rest of us need to help and speak up, but we do

The Contractor of the Year Award, sponsored by ReedHycalog, was established in 1988 and is the only industry award that exclusively honors drilling contractors. Mr Childers has selected Virginia Polytechnic Institute of Blacksburg, Va., as the recipient of the \$2,500 scholarship made by ReedHycalog in Mr Childer's name.

not have the name recognition or resources to push this forward as the major oil companies do."

TREMENDOUS PROGRESS

Compare field work today with field work from 40 years ago, and the improvements are obvious, Mr Childers said.

"Back then, well control was a mystery, and the idea of constant bottomhole pressure was neither fully understood nor accepted," he recalled. "But we've made tremendous progress on efficiency, safety and environment. The industry should be proud, even though we don't get credit for how well we've done."

Young people also get a lot more support offshore nowadays, he said. "Back then, young engineers were often seen as visitors on an offshore rig. Now, when an engineer goes to the field, crews will often say, 'Here comes some help.'"

And it's extremely important for young workers to go out into the field because "in our industry, you're not going to get all the education you need from college."

Young people also need to find experienced mentors. "I think **Jim Rike**, a completion expert with Exxon, and **Doc Laborde** with ODECO and John Irwin with Atwood have been great examples and mentors for me."

AWARD IS OVERWHELMING

Even though Mr Childers isn't a stranger to prestigious awards — he is the 1969 recipient of the Cedrick K Ferguson Metal, SPE's highest award for engineers younger than 33, and was the Distinguished Lecturer for SPE-AIME in 1981 — he said he feels humbled to receive the Contractor of the Year Award.

"There are so many good people who have done so much for the industry, so the fact that IADC picked me is somewhat overwhelming," he said. "I'm also very happy for Atwood, because this award is for them, too." ■