

HELLO!

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THE FIRST FAMILY
PHOTOS OF THE SINGER
TURNED AUTHOR AT HOME
SANDIE SHAW



IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS OF WALES

TENDER SCENES IN
PRAGUE AS THE
ROYAL COUPLE
VISIT ONE OF
EUROPE'S
MOST
ROMANTIC
CITIES



ATHLETICS' GOLDEN GIRL FLO JO INTRODUCES
HER GORGEOUS NEW BABY DAUGHTER MARY RUTH
LARRY HAGMAN: THE FINAL EPISODE AS DALLAS
IS LAID TO REST AFTER 13 INCREDIBLE YEARS
DUCHESS OF BEAUFORT: AT HOME IN BADMINTON

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HELLO!



SPECTACULAR IMAGES OF THE WORLD'S MOST TERRIFYING WORK SITE

40 FIREMEN BRAVE AN INFERNO EVERY DAY TO PROTECT OUR PLANET BY EXTINGUISHING THE FLAMING OIL WELLS IN KUWAIT

In our worst nightmares we wouldn't have dared imagine such difficulty... In a phrase, Raymond Henry, vice-president of the Red Adair Company, sums up the infernal challenge faced by the men trying to extinguish and cap the burning oil wells in Kuwait.

At present, 40 firemen are working under extremely difficult conditions to undo the damage wreaked by the Iraqi invaders before they were forced out of the emirate at the end of February. They make up the crews of four companies: the Red Adair Co., Boots and Coots, Wild Well Control — all three from Texas — and Safety Boss, of Calgary, Canada. Every single day they face unimaginable dangers, discouraging difficulties and the sort of work that is physically exhausting.

The teams, each composed of ten men, confront apparently insurmountable obstacles with a disciplined routine. The men get up at 5.30am, have their breakfast, gather for their briefing and set out on the road ready to go to work around 8.30am until sunset. But even then, far away from the raging infernos, their work isn't over.

It will take them two or three hours more to clean themselves and their equipment. ▶

After the war to evict the Iraqis from Kuwait, the desert firemen — three teams from Texas and one from Canada — are now fighting to put out the blazing oil wells that Hussein's troops left behind. This battle could last years





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Covered in oil from head to foot, members of Canada's Safety Boss team replace a destroyed part on a gushing well after having extinguished the flames. Looking at these pictures, it is clear why the men must return home to recover their health after only six weeks on the job





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At 8pm, the chiefs of the crews meet in order to discuss the day's work and prepare the programme for the following day. At 8.30pm, the men have dinner together, and an hour later they return to their sleeping quarters — until dawn,

when it's back to the battlefield. Each of the four companies called to the rescue by Kuwait has sent half its manpower to the site and rotates its teams every six weeks. There are two reasons for this: the work is extremely demanding, physically,

and therefore even the sturdiest cannot work under such pressure for a long time. At the end of six weeks, they must spend at least the same amount of time recovering their strength. The second reason is quite simply a technical one — if all the



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It is not science fiction. It's one of the most dangerous and unpleasant jobs on earth. Often, extinguished wells re-ignite (above). And the smoke from the flaming wells seen in the background (right) contains dangerous gases that can kill

men intervened at the same time, there would not be sufficient equipment.

This is hardly surprising. During a normal year, these specialist enterprises are called to sort out accidents involving around 20 oil wells. In Kuwait, 600 have been destroyed.

Priority has been given to the "spouting wells" which, depending on the quality of the oil, are not aflame. These wells liberate a highly toxic sulphurous gas and, even worse, a viscous liquid which forms, in places, veritable lakes across the white sand of the desert. It is a form of pollution that has not yet been studied in any great depth but could have disastrous effects.

Apparently, these erupting wells are in fact easier to "kill" — to use the expression used by the firemen — than the burning wells. ►

The environment around



each flaming well reaches such a high temperature that the fire can easily resume almost as soon as it has been extinguished.

So far, over 100 of the 600 oil wells have been mastered — but they have been the easiest ones in most cases. The time the whole job will take is unknown — but the previously announced prediction of two years seems overly optimistic.

Paradoxically, the firemen fear the extinguished wells most of all. Some are, theoretically, beyond catching fire again, but in the case of others, the slightest spark can unleash an apocalypse. And then, there are the so-called "killing wells" which give off hydrogen sulphide. This gas, terrible if it's not burned, first destroys one's sense of smell — and then the respiratory system. And the danger also lurks in places where it's not expected — as was recently made clear when five people were killed — two *Financial Times* journalists whose car exploded in flames when crossing a pool of oil, and three oil field workers who had stopped to help.

It is indeed an inferno that the firemen face every day. The only consolation, if it can be considered one, is the money. Each team of ten men earns \$17,000 per day, plus a special bonus of \$2,000 for each extinguished well. This is nothing if one thinks of what is at stake, economically and ecologically. For several hundred dollars per day, each man who fights in Kuwait is, in a way, engaged in a mission to protect our planet. **H**

PHOTOS: STEPHANIE COMPOINT/SYGMA 2



Putting into position a new part on a less damaged well (above) and hosing down after a particularly filthy task (below). The men work from sunrise to sundown (above right) — and then spend two or three more hours scrubbing the dirt and oil off themselves (below right) and their equipment





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