

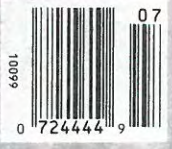
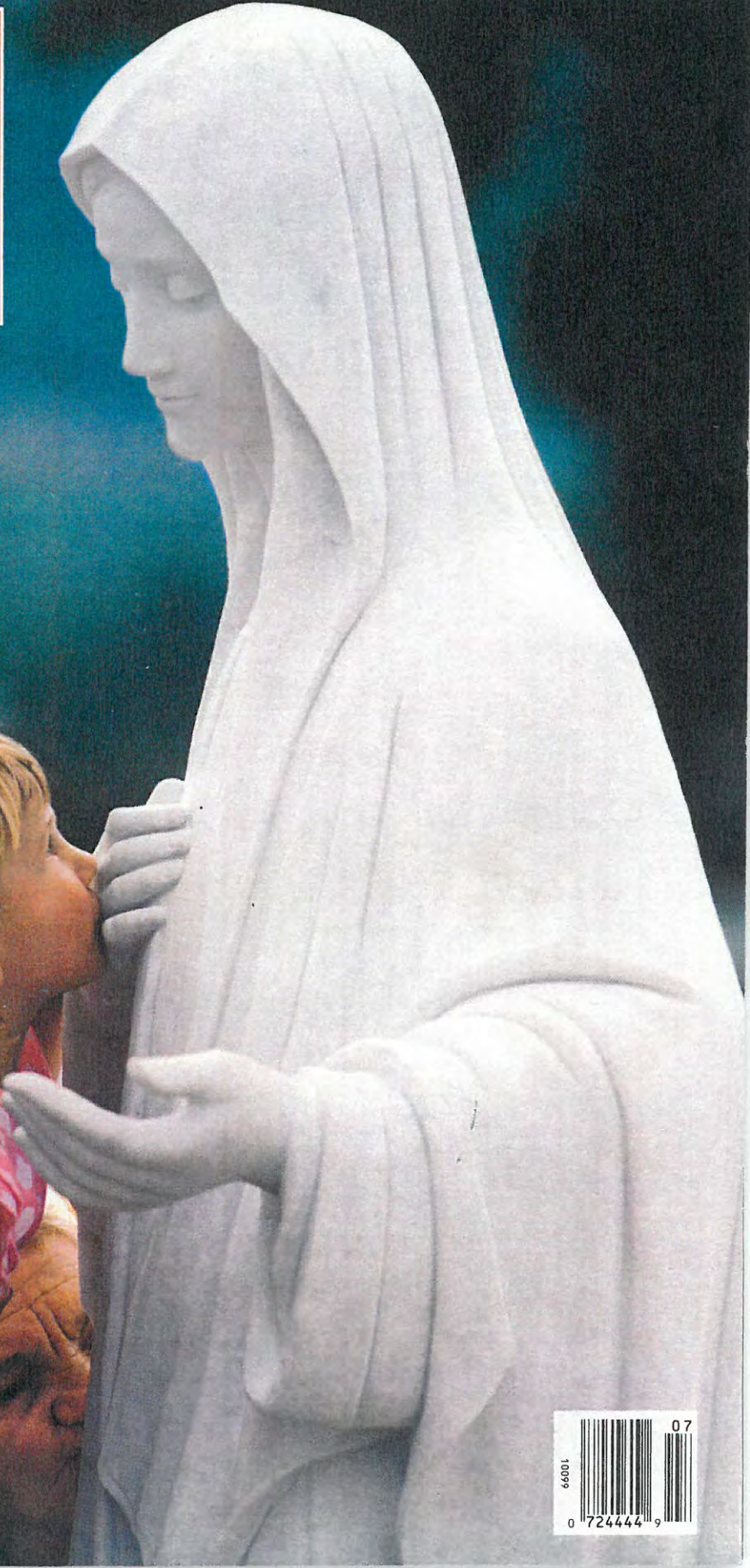
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# LIFE

## Do You Believe In Miracles?

If you do, you're not alone. From a vision of the Virgin Mary on a hillside in Yugoslavia to the face of Christ on a billboard in Georgia, signs of a divine presence are touching millions

Fifteen million pilgrims have visited Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, where, 10 years ago, children said they first saw the Virgin Mary





REPORTING: ANNE HOLLISTER

# HELL ON EARTH

Through raging infernos and fields of bombs come brave men to battle the worst environmental nightmare ever



## MIKE MILLER

*(far left)*, president of the Safety Boss company, one of four firms trying to save Kuwait's oil fields, redirects a fountain of crude with his foot while workers struggle to remove a broken flange. A wrong move can cause so much pressure to build up inside the wellhead that it explodes, sending men and machinery flying. Small wonder then that "Mac" McIntire *(above)* secures his helmet with duct tape.



Photographs by Stephane Compont  
Text by Charles Hirshberg



## FIRE FIGHTERS

from Red Adair (left) shield themselves from hellacious heat with a wall of corrugated tin. They are sprayed constantly with water to keep them cool. This fire will be extinguished with explosives, which rob it of the oxygen it needs to burn. Safety Boss specialists (right) use pry bars to remove bolts. Some are so badly damaged they will ultimately have to be hacksawed off.

**F**irst, there are the fires: They burn at 4,000°, turning nearby sand into liquid glass. “The ground is so hot, if you kneel on it, you get blisters,” says fire fighter Mark Badick. “Your clothes heat up and your zipper burns,” says one crew chief, who knows from painful experience. Second, when the fires are finally out, comes the cloudburst of raw oil gushing from the wells at a force of up to 5,000 pounds per square inch. “It’s like a high-pressure hose right in your face,” Miller says. Within minutes the spray covers even a snugly clothed body with hot waxy oil that prevents a person from sweating, even in Kuwait’s 120° temperatures. And the noise! “It’s deafening,” says Safety Boss’s Ron McMahon. “Someone can be screaming in your face, and you can’t hear what he’s saying.” These are only a few of the obstacles facing Houston’s Boots and Coots, Wild Well Control and Red Adair Co. They, along with Calgary’s Safety Boss, have been hired to cap the more than 600 “wild” wells the Iraqis blew up. The Kuwaitis say they are losing six million barrels of crude a day, about 10 percent of the world’s total oil consumption. The financial cost has been estimated at \$1,000 a second; the environmental cost is as yet incalculable and may depend largely on the success of these men.

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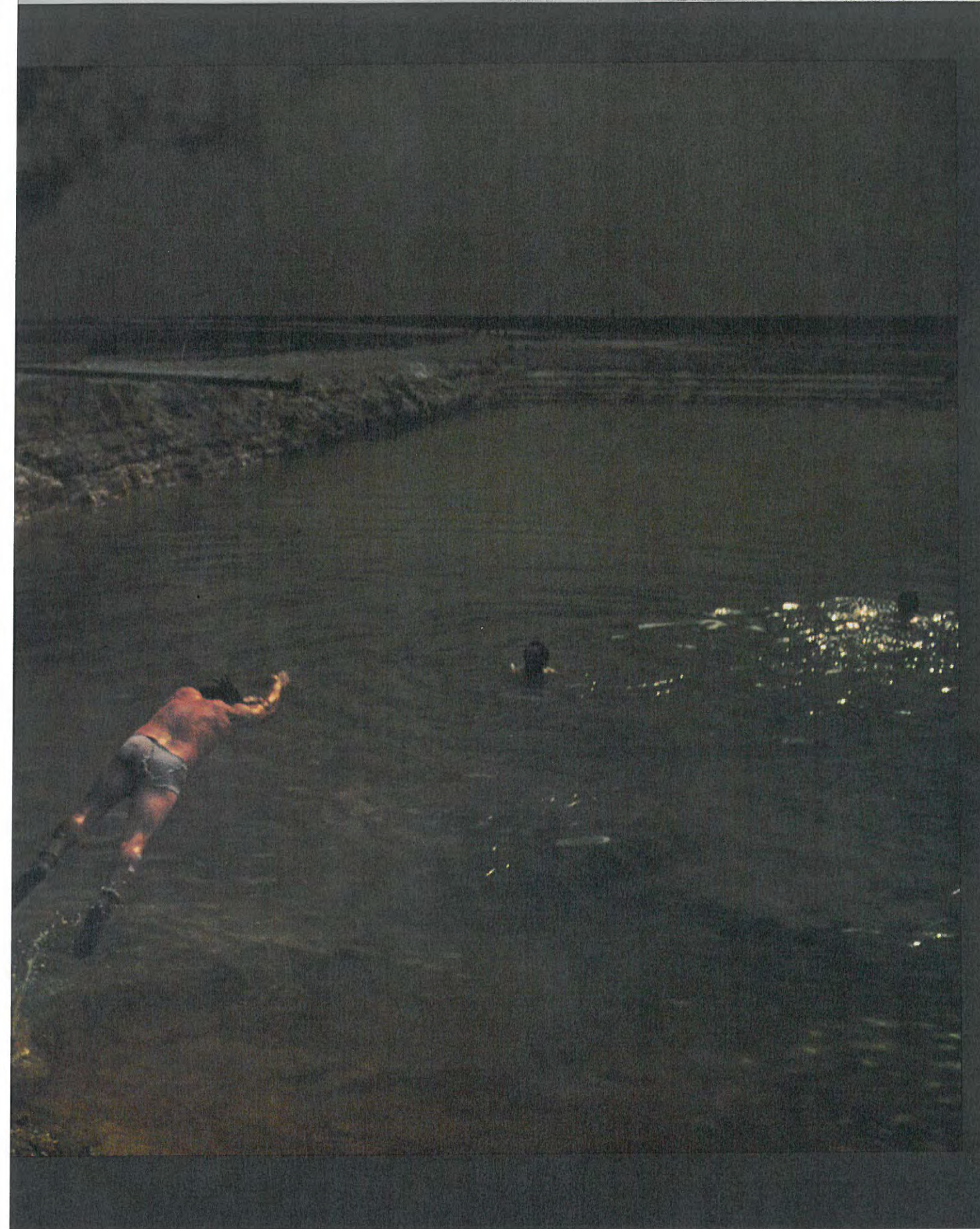


## GETTING CLEAN

and getting cool are constant concerns. Boots and Coots hands get both by taking a dip in a man-made pond filled with seawater used for firefighting (right). Temporarily blinded, Safety Boss's Mark Badick (top left) is led from a wellhead by his crew chief, Randy Arkinstall. "I got oil in my eyes," he says, "and, oh yeah, it burns like hell." Workers try to wear goggles, but the constant spray usually renders them useless. Ken Rose (bottom), a Safety Boss crew chief, gets blasted clean with a fire hose.



**D**arker than the inside of a cow," says a Safety Boss worker of his new world. Impenetrable clouds of toxic smoke fill the skies each day, pouring 50,000 tons of sulfur dioxide—the primary constituent of acid rain—into the air. Experienced oil field hands, fearless even in the face of 400-foot-high plumes of fire, blanch at the thought of inhaling the soot. "Breathing that stuff gives you headaches and messes with your nasal passages," says James Tuppen, a crew chief for Boots and Coots. "It feels like somebody is standing on your chest all the time." Physicians say it's still too early to know what the long-term health effects may be, but Safety Boss workers are required to have respiratory checkups every two months. Some who have returned home report coughing up black particles. There are other risks too. Unexploded bombs dropped over the oil fields during the war by U.S. aircraft are everywhere. "We've seen them in the hundreds," says Miller. "And because they're covered with oil, it would be very easy to run over one. There was a camel in our area who stepped on one and blew himself to pieces." The additional threats of heat prostration and exploding wellheads make this one of the most treacherous jobs in the world. "Every day I'm in that field," says a roughneck, with a chuckle, "I find three or four new ways to die."





## COLLAPSED

against a truck wheel after a long day, Paul-Emile Ouellette can only think of one thing: getting enough sleep to go back to work again. It's a filthy job, but he loves it. "I've been pumped for weeks," he says.

**T**he work is unremittingly hard, but the compensation is correspondingly great. There are eight men in a typical well-capping team. They work 12-hour days, 28 in a row, go home for a four-week rest, and then they're back at it again. Their employers charge \$500,000 a month for each team. While team members won't reveal how much they make individually, most say the rewards go beyond money. Perhaps no one is in a better position to explain this than Paul-Emile Ouellette. An inexperienced Safety Boss hand, with the distinction of working toward his Ph.D. in philosophy, Ouellette was astonished to discover that putting out a well fire "is an enormously emotional experience." He has given a lot of thought to why this is so: When a fire is finally extinguished, the smoke lifts, the clouds dissipate, the sky clears, and Ouellette experiences "the ecstasy of *seeing* hope," hope for this wounded planet and, indeed, hope for us, its clumsy caretakers. □