

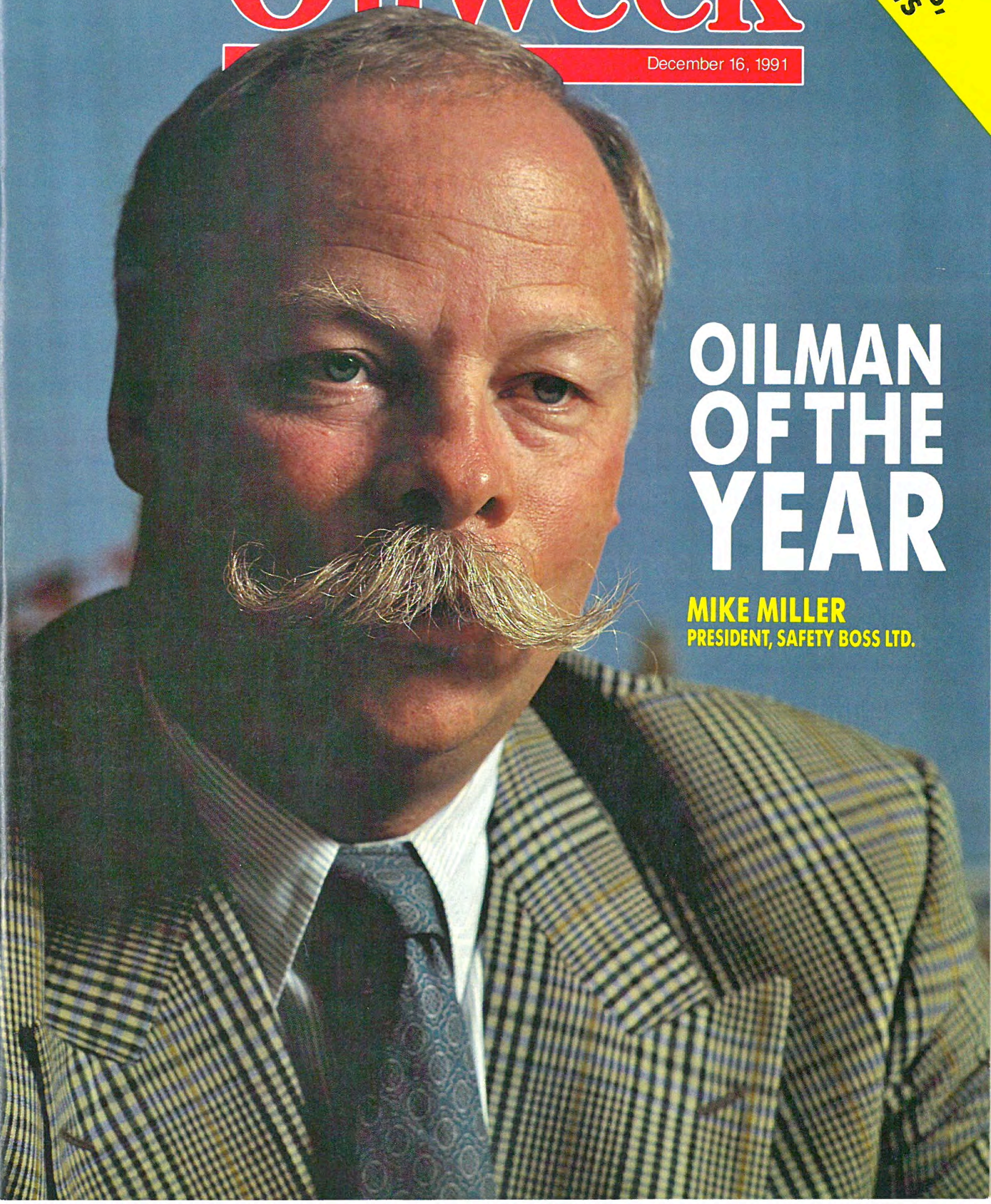
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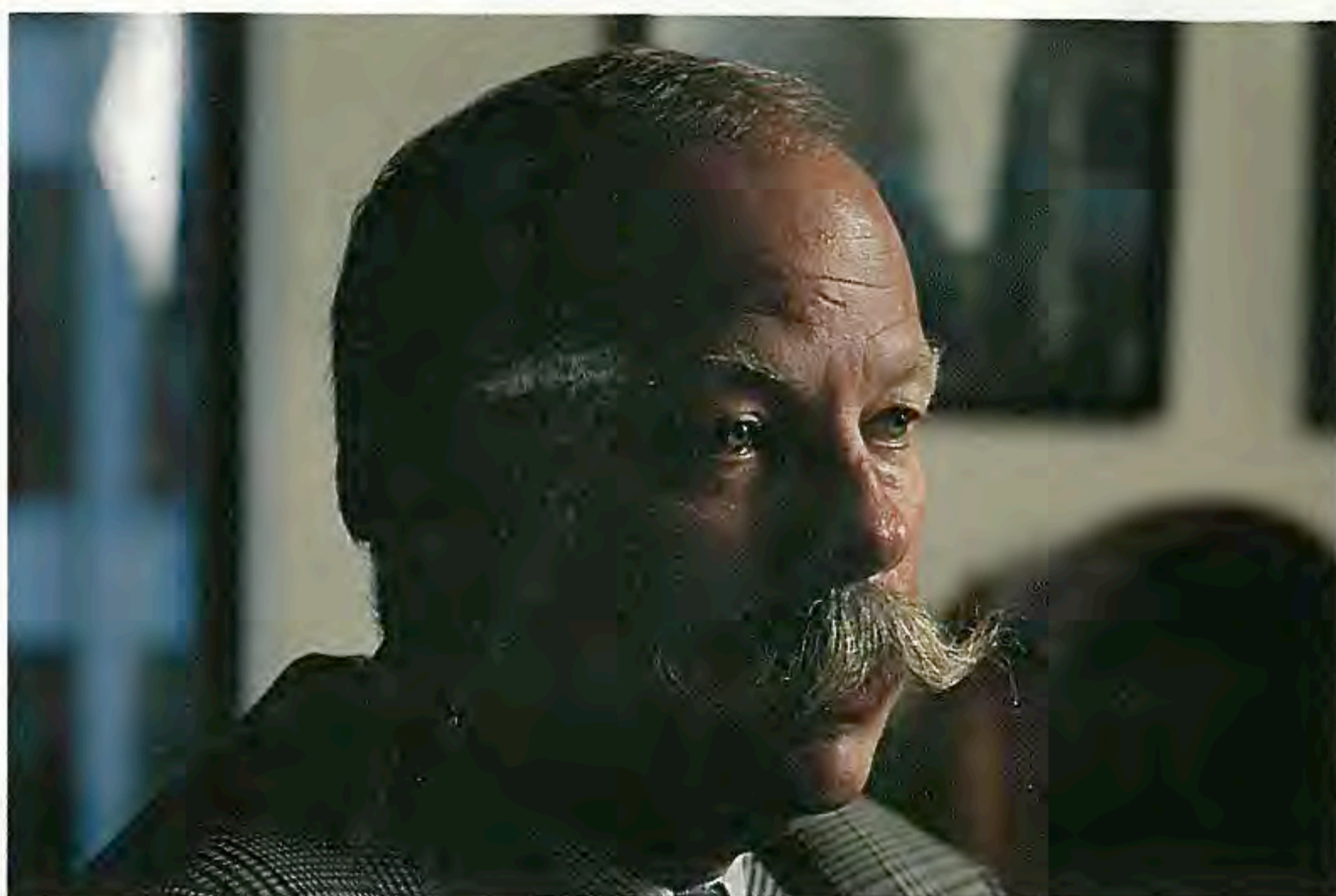
December 16, 1991

OUTLOOK
TO PLAYERS,
TO VIEWS

OILMAN OF THE YEAR

MIKE MILLER
PRESIDENT, SAFETY BOSS LTD.





BRINGING BACK THE SUN

The drive for perfection that typifies Mike Miller has finally earned his firm a well-deserved place in the sun

BY DAVID COLL

It was — and is — one of the worst environmental disasters in recorded history, certainly in the storied chronicles of the oil business. Grimacing men with outstretched arms, furiously turning heavy wrenches to cap a well while covered head-to-toe in viscous oil; a desert horizon enveloped in the black smoke of burning wells at high noon — these striking images won't soon be forgotten.

By now, we're all too familiar with the frightening legacy left behind by the Iraqis, when U.S.-led troops forced them to beat a hasty retreat from Kuwait in mid-February. The wealthy emirate was a shambles, as the black smoke from hundreds of burning wells turned day into night for months on end. It was the kind of vindictive, full-scale sacking not seen since Hitler's *Wehrmacht* ran roughshod over Eastern Europe in the early 1940s.

Considering the scope of damage (the tab just to rehabilitate Kuwait's oil industry will exceed \$5 billion, according to a United Nations task force), its speedy restoration is something of a modern-day miracle.

Perhaps the best example of Kuwait's quick-fix is the engine of its economy, its oil and gas infrastructure. Just months after 732 of its 935 wells were damaged (result-

ing in an estimated daily production loss of 4.5 million barrels per day) and its pipelines and processing facilities pillaged and sabotaged, Kuwait was again a net exporter of oil. The 650 flaming wells — originally forecast to take anywhere from 13 months to five years to quell and cap — were snuffed in just under nine months, in early November. Kuwait's oil ministry now predicts it will reach pre-war export totals of 2.4 million barrels per day by late 1993 or early 1994.

Even in retrospect, it seems trite to suggest things could have been worse. But few would argue that the effects of the disaster weren't mitigated to a large degree by an unprecedented international co-operative effort. Picture 4,000 pieces of heavy equipment and 9,000 workers from 43 countries and five continents putting out fires, capping wells or performing support services in a country not much larger than Delaware.

As good a role model as you'll find of one who helped expedite Kuwait's remarkable oilfield resurrection is Canada's Mike Miller, the 47-year-old president of Calgary-based Safety Boss Ltd.

Miller's company — one of four original firefighting teams — emerged as the clear winner in the number of fires extinguished with 180, including the last, to its credit.

Boots & Coots put out 126, Wild Well Control 120, and Red Adair 111. Before it was over, scores of others — some national delegations — would also play a role.

It's an indication of Miller's character that he doesn't mention these numbers without quick qualification. More important than the stats, he says, is the co-operation between the companies and the knowledge and experience developed during those hot, smoke-filled dog-days in the desert. "When you live to do this type of work, when you can do it day after day and you put a big effort into sorting out better ways, systems and procedures, you realize there will never be another opportunity like this to hone your skills."

The native of tiny Black Diamond, Alberta, began fighting oilfield fires at age 12, helping his father. Ken "Smoky" Miller started Safety Boss with one truck in Drayton Valley during boom times in May 1956. Mike recalls his first fire: "A winch truck ran off the road in the ice and snow and it sheared a wellhead off. It was a decent enough fire, as I remember. I kind of stood around and kept out of the way."

Although he learned the ropes alongside his father, the headstrong son was eager to carve his own niche. He worked on the rigs at home and abroad, in the employ of firms such as Banff Oil, Mobil, Aquitaine and

Ranchmen's Resources, but continued to help his father when the need arose. "It's no different than if you're a farmer's son, going back and taking the crop off. There was a significant benefit for oil companies for them to have me with that firefighting experience. So when my father had a blowout and I asked for time off, there was never a problem."

For 10-odd years, Mike lived the life of an itinerant rig hand and later operations manager of an international exploration company, acquiring expertise in all aspects of downhole operations. By early 1980, with his father's health failing, he bought Safety Boss. "It became apparent to me at that time that it was something I always really wanted. I guess the only thing is my timing wasn't very good." Indeed. One week later, the National Energy Program was announced. The 24-person firm he took over numbered just six employees by late 1981.

The depressed domestic market and Miller's world travels made it natural for Safety Boss to look overseas for a growing portion of its daily bread. "The seventies were so good, there really was no reason to look overseas," he says. "In the eighties we had no choice. So we targeted areas where Americans were unwelcome. Obviously, there was good rationale for that."

Safety Boss first gained notice in the Middle East back in 1982, when one of its teams capped a well offshore Iran in just 17 days. In 1985, Kuwait was one of 15 countries on Miller's three-week itinerary. His inaugural involvement in the emirate came later that year, when he was hired by the Kuwait Oil Co. for a series of blow-out seminars.

Some roller-coaster years followed for Safety Boss. Then, one day in September 1990, the phone in Miller's downtown Calgary office rang. He couldn't have known it then, but his life — and the future of his company — was to change forever. "The Kuwaitis realized their wellheads were being wired with explosives and they called Safety Boss and the three U.S. companies," he recalls. "So we went down to Houston to co-ordinate, and KOC explained the contract and defined each firm's role."

Each was advised to propose the same equipment. But Miller had a more mobile system in mind. Mobility is a trait Safety Boss developed out of necessity, because of the great distances between wellsites in Western Canada. It was to become a key factor in his firm's success in Kuwait.

The real adventure began for Miller and his men on April 5. One of those men was blow-out specialist Wayne Stennes, who'd worked for Safety Boss from 1979-85. "I had no second thoughts about leaving for the experience, the money, and to help the environment." Second thoughts came quickly, though. "You kind of wondered what you got yourself into, the first day or



'When you live to do this type of work, you realize there will never be another opportunity like this.'

two, anyway. It was like being on another planet."

Miller says all of his men were shocked by the extent of the damage, the blackness and the smoke. But did he have doubts? Was he scared? The questions are brushed neatly aside, in the matter-of-fact tone of one to whom peril is second nature.

"He's never, ever, said he was scared," says his eldest daughter Stacy, who works for Safety Boss along with Tannis, one of her two sisters. "I don't know if that's just because he didn't want to scare us."

His daughter was not so worried about her father as she was her husband, Ron McMahan, who had no experience in oil-field fires prior to volunteering for active service in Kuwait. McMahan had a nice, safe job teaching psychology in Long Beach, California, but wanted a change. The couple was planning to move to Canada, regardless.

"I was very worried about my husband," says Stacy, who was pregnant at the time

Ron went to Kuwait. "But I was glad my Dad was there to look after him." Her husband gained valuable experience fighting the fires, but Stacy thinks he'll likely stick to more intellectual pursuits in the future (McMahan has already begun writing about his Middle East experience). Her father, too, is considering taking pen to paper for a series of technical papers dealing with advances in blowout technology. "Clearly, the blowout business has advanced technologically more this year than in the past 20 years," he says.

Unlike a field general preparing a battle plan safely behind the lines, Miller was in the forefront of the Kuwaiti fires. As leader, his job was to scout ahead and prepare a plan of attack for the burning wells his teams would soon tackle.

"He's very much in control," says daughter Stacy. "People are always surprised at how good he is at administering things. He's the type of guy that can make the right decision quickly, out of many different options, when everyone else is in a panic."

"He's got the ability to get along with everybody," says Stennes. "You can talk to him; he's open and he's easy-going." That doesn't mean Miller's not

tough when he has to be. "He knows the men and he expects a lot from them. If you screw up, you don't want to be around."

"If there's one thing I've noticed about Mike, it's that he either does it first-class or he doesn't do it at all," says Brian McCutcheon,

communications co-ordinator for Safety Boss. "I've heard lots of people say, 'Oh, well, they'll never notice.' You'll never hear Mike say that."

Safety Boss went to the plate in Kuwait as the decided underdog, against three heavy-hitters from Houston. "The U.S. had basically just won the war and that was certainly a feeling very evident in the American's minds," Miller says. "The feeling was plain and simple; that we were unwanted, unqualified and really hadn't earned the right to be there. One of the motivating factors for our men was that feeling."

It's been a slow ride to the top, but that drive for perfection that typifies Mike Miller in the eyes of his family, his employees and his colleagues, has finally earned he and his firm a well-deserved place in the sun.

The sun that is beginning to peak timidly through the sky over that ill-fated part of the Persian Gulf once again.