Engineering aspects of jacket toppling as a means of platform abandonment

S. WALKER and J. WILLIAMS, SLP Engineering, UK

Introduction

A number of different approaches have been considered for the deconstruction and subsequent disposal of steel jacket structures. The usual options include partial or complete removal, either piece-meal or in large sections, or toppling. The partial removal and toppling alternatives may be considered for platforms in deeper waters, whereas complete removal is the only option for decommissioning of platforms in shallow water.

There is now a limited but nonetheless growing body of experience of decommissioning platforms in deeper waters, initially in the Gulf of Mexico and more recently in the North Sea. Although many of the engineering aspects are still in the development stage, valuable lessons have been learned from recent projects.

In this paper, a number of the key aspects of the deconstruction of platforms in deeper waters are examined, and solutions to some of the major problem areas are put forward. The paper examines both practical design considerations, and the advanced numerical modelling which must be performed. These techniques are illustrated by reference to a design example.

Design criteria

A primary objective in the deconstruction of a platform is that the statutory requirement for free water above any remaining debris should be achieved. The current consensus of opinion favours dividing the North Sea into two zones by a line drawn approximately east by north-east from St. Fergus Head. This line corresponds roughly to the 100 metre isobath. Above this line, 75 metres of clear water is required, whilst below the value is 55 metres (see Figure 9).

It is of vital importance that the deconstruction operation should be reliable, because it would be very expensive and probably also hazardous to deal with a partially failed structure. There is also little opportunity to take corrective action during a deconstruction operation, if events do not proceed

as planned. To fulfil these requirements, the following criteria should be adopted.

(a) Fail safe systems should be used where possible, so that the failure of any component will not result in the primary objective not being achieved.
(b) Critical systems should be duplicated.
(c) Untried technology should be avoided, unless absolutely necessary.
(d) It will not be possible to engineer all aspects of the work in full detail and, therefore, the engineering work should be concentrated on those aspects judged to be most critical.

The appropriate design philosophy entails a mixture of conventional engineering principles, such as might be employed in the design of permanent structures, and the more innovative approaches, which are to be found in some demolition projects.

Engineering aspects of toppling

The decommissioning of steel platforms involves deconstruction followed by removal to a disposal site. The key question in planning the deconstruction is to decide upon the optimum number and size of sections to be removed - this is a trade-off between the amount of underwater cutting to be performed and the size of the lifting tackle required (either in the form of lift barges or buoyancy tanks).

An option which is particularly attractive, for locations where it is permitted, is jacket toppling. The first main advantage of this is that the deconstruction and disposal are combined into a single operation. Secondly, toppling is effectively a 'one piece' removal, but without the need for heavy lifting equipment.

The structural engineering is carried out so that, by a combination of severing members, forming hinges and by applying destabilising forces, a toppling mechanism is formed which leads to the controlled failure of the structure. The design criteria for this are as follows.

(a) The mechanism should be arranged so that, even if unexpected circumstances arise, the platform will come to rest on the seabed leaving the desired clearance above the structure.
(b) The formation of unpredictable failure mechanisms should be precluded at all costs.
(c) Underwater working should, to the extent practicable, be minimised.
(d) It is vital that parts of the structure which are required to remain intact during the toppling mechanism should not be damaged, for example by

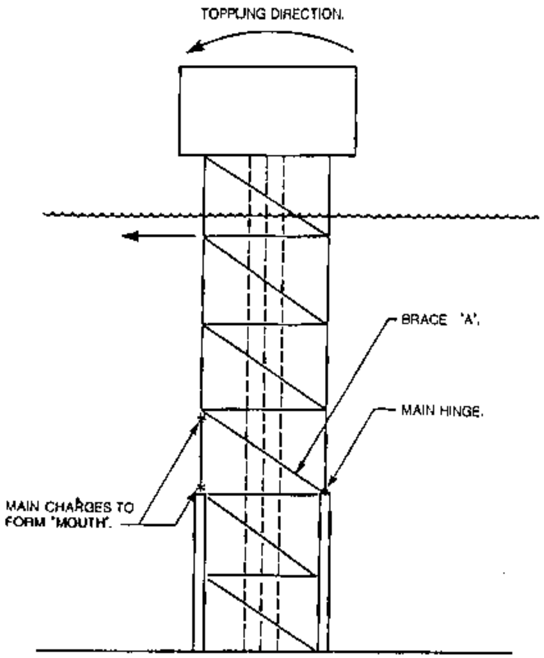


Fig. 1. Riser platform toppling mechanism

a temporary overload or by the forces from explosive charges.

Several variants of platform toppling have been studied (ref. 1) of which a few have been put into effect on actual deconstruction projects. In one project, buoyancy tanks were used in the controlled toppling of a steel jacket and the remains of the platform were used to make an artificial reef (ref. 2). Whilst this may have particular attractions for certain situations, it is not the preferred solution for a straightforward toppling operation since the method does not comply with the 'fail safe' criterion (e.g. the loss of a buoyancy tank would lead to an uncontrolled failure mechanism) and there is considerable underwater working involved in the attachment, and subsequent removal, of the buoyancy tanks.

A more straightforward toppling operation, undertaken in the Gulf of Mexico (ref. 3) in 1987, involved severing the piles at the mudline and pulling the structure to failure using cables anchored to the seabed. The structure was an 8 pile jacket standing in 350 feet (75m) water depth, weighing a total of 3500 tons. The operation was executed according to plan, but it is interesting to note that the actual pulling force of 290 tons was 50% higher than predicted.

Whilst this latter scheme could be applied to North Sea structures, several modifications would be desirable. Firstly, many of the larger North Sea structures have a considerable number of piles (typically in excess of 20) and so it is better to cut the legs above the piles. Secondly, it is advantageous to arrange the failure mechanism so that the self weight of the structure contributes to the destabilising moment, both to reduce the required applied forces from cables and to create a more reliable mechanism. These features are realised in the toppling mechanism illustrated in Figure 1.

Toppling of topsides with the jacket structure

Two possible scenarios are available with the toppling option: overturning of the jacket with the topsides still intact or removal of the topsides prior to jacket toppling.

Toppling of the jacket and topside together obviously offers the advantage of a one-stage deconstruction operation. In addition, the topside raises the height of the centre of gravity of the structure and thus decreases the stability of the platform during overturning. However, there are some drawbacks with the combined deconstruction scenario.

(a) The forces on the topside as it hits the water may be high and could break off items such as flare booms, drilling derricks and communications aerials - consideration should be given to removing these items before toppling.
(b) All loose items must be tied down to prevent them breaking free.
(c) All process equipment must be clean and free from toxic and dangerous materials. This is particularly important with piping and large vessels which will need to be punctured to reduce restoring (buoyancy) forces when the topside reaches sea level. An attractive option is to refill the vessels with sea water before toppling to increase the overturning moment and eliminate buoyancy forces. Checks will, however, need to be made to quantify the effect that this has on hinge forces.

The Joint Industry Project on Platform Abandonment (ref. 1) addresses the third item in detail and covers the required degree of cleaning, purging and removal of equipment under the categories

(a) hazardous systems - hydrocarbon handling and processing
(b) non-hazardous systems - utilities
(c) toxic and other hazardous chemical systems
(d) electrical systems.

To illustrate the extensive activities involved in fully decommissioning topsides, the eight operations required for hazardous systems were identified as

(a) depressurise and purge
(b) drain
(c) water flush
(d) second drain
(e) cleaning (water jetting/steam cleaning)
(f) water fill
(g) inerting (nitrogen purge)
(h) isolation.

Most cleaning and purging is likely to be carried out in-situ if combined topsides/jacket toppling is adopted. However, with other deconstruction options for the topsides, although an initial 'first clean' of all systems would be carried out on the platform, this could be followed by onshore operations or use of an adjacent barge for secondary cleaning and scrap processing.

Underwater cutting techniques

In a platform deconstruction there is a substantial amount of cutting of members to be performed underwater, and the use of explosives for this purpose is becoming an established technique. Some of the relative advantages and disadvantages of this method, viewed from the structural engineering standpoint, are discussed below.

A major advantage of the use of explosives for cutting is the reduced amount of underwater working, compared to mechanical or thermal cutting systems. Additionally, after the explosives have been placed and fused, all of the required cuts may be made simultaneously. With conventional systems, the members are cut one by one, with the cutting operation possibly continuing over an extended period. The structure is thus in a weakened condition for a longer period, and there is an increased possibility of storm damage occurring.

On the debit side, because the cuts occur simultaneously, there is no chance to take corrective action should the operation not proceed according to plan. One of the major potential risks is that a critical charge may not detonate, leading to an incomplete collapse of the structure. It is prudent to duplicate critical charges and their associated systems to counter this possibility.

The major problem associated with the explosive cutting is the potential for unwanted damage caused by the explosion, both to the environment and to parts of the structure which are required to remain intact during the toppling. Steps must therefore be taken to minimise this damage.

(a) Undue conservatism should not be used in sizing the charges.
(b) Shaped charges should be used where possible for cutting steel members, since they are more efficient than bulk charges.
(c) The charges should be placed as far away from critical members as possible.
(d) Consideration should be given to placing charges inside members - this gives the most effective use of the explosive, and partly contains the explosive forces.
(e) Measures should be taken to protect critical members, for example by internal grouting or by flooding the members concerned.
(f) Appropriate numerical simulations should be used during the engineering phase to investigate the effects of the explosive forces.

By using these techniques, it is possible to eliminate the uncertainty associated with explosive cutting, and to engineer reliable schemes for the deconstruction of steel platforms.

Design study - toppling of steel platform

Introduction

The considerations discussed in this paper will be illustrated with reference to a design study on the demolition of a steel riser platform. The platform forming the subject of this study is a 4 leg structure standing in deep water. This investigation considers toppling with the topsides in place. The wells and the conductors were assumed to be grout-filled and to be demolished with the platform.

Selection of the mechanism

To reduce the amount of steel to be cut in severing the legs, it is possible for the legs to be cut just above the pile sleeves. The positioning of the cuts leaves the base of the structure intact. The most effective means of forming a mechanism is to remove a length from two adjacent legs, thereby forming a 'mouth', and letting the self weight of the structure act as a destabilising force.

Considerable interest centres on the braces at the level of the mouth (see member 'A' in Figure 1). Removal of these braces by explosive charges could lead to uncertainty in the position of the hinges in the two remaining legs, and to an unpredictable failure mechanism. By leaving the brace members in place, the hinges will be constrained to form in the legs just above the pile guides. To assist in the formation of these hinges, light charges were considered at the hinge locations with the objective of weakening the joint cans.

The lower members above and below the hinge would be flooded in order to resist radial pressure loads and to increase the overturning moment.

In studying the mechanics of the toppling, it was apparent that there will be relative movement between the conductors and their guide frames, and

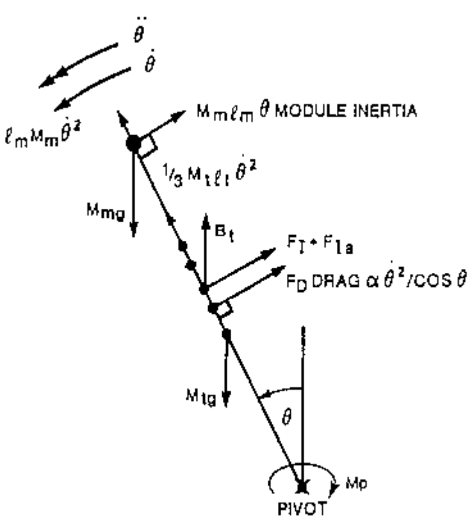


Fig. 2. Forces acting during toppling

that this will have to be accounted for.

Behaviour of the conductors

The behaviour of the conductors is deemed to have a potentially major influence on the toppling behaviour of the structure, and this was therefore studied in some detail. The conductors are 30" in diameter and filled with grout, which represents a very significant additional strengthening of the platform. It was calculated that the conductors could prevent the toppling from taking place and that it would not be possible to sever the conductors with reasonable quantities of explosives.

There are two basic mechanisms by which the conductors could prevent toppling, namely bending resistance and the development of axial forces.

Calculations indicated that the bending strength of the conductors is not a problem, since the effective lever arm is adequate to ensure the formation of plastic hinges. Regarding the possible axial load, it was computed that each conductor could support a force of approximately 600 tonnes between adjacent conductor guide frames. This would be sufficient to halt the platform toppling.

This axial force could develop if the conductors were prevented from sliding freely through the guide frames. It is also possible that the conductor connectors could catch on the guide cones.

A more detailed study revealed that if the conductors caught on the guide frames, the latter would fail without halting the platform toppling. However, if the guide frames fail, there is nothing to pull the conductors over with the platform. It is therefore proposed that wire ropes should be placed around the platform at two levels, to confine the conductors and ensure that they fail as intended.

Structural analysis

A range of detailed analyses were performed to investigate the major aspects of the toppling. The principal analyses were

(a) determination of the rigid body motions
(b) structural analysis of the platform at various stages during the toppling
(c) analyses to determine the explosive loadings on the structure of the platform and the local response.

The analysis of rigid body motions utilised a single degree of freedom model, in which the principal unknown is the angle of rotation of the structure (refer to Figure 2). The objectives of this analysis were to calculate time history plots, in order to generate inertial loads, drag forces and centripetal accelerations for inclusion in the main structural analyses. This analysis also produced time histories of the pivot forces, to enable the integrity of the hinges to be confirmed. The model accounts for the principal features of the system, ensuring that the results can be used with some confidence, and yet is sufficiently simple to enable parametric studies to be performed with a minimum of computing effort. As an example of the outputs of the analysis, time histories of the angle of rotation and the reactions at the pivots for a typical set of governing conditions are shown in Figures 3 and 4. It may be seen that the toppling takes some 20 seconds to achieve a 60% angle of tilt (at this stage the toppling may be regarded as virtually complete, since the platform would inevitably proceed to ultimate failure).

The main structural analyses were performed for various 'snapshots' in time to determine the member forces and to confirm that critical members will not fail prematurely. In theory, these analyses should be performed as transient, dynamic analyses; however, in practice, sufficient accuracy is obtained from quasi-static analyses in which a self equilibrating set of forces is applied to the structure. Several of these forces (e.g. inertia and drag) are dependent on the platform motions, which were obtained from the 'rigid body' analysis described above. The structural analysis clearly demonstrated the major differences in the loadpaths through the structure during the toppling, but confirmed the adequacy of the basic structure to resist these loads.

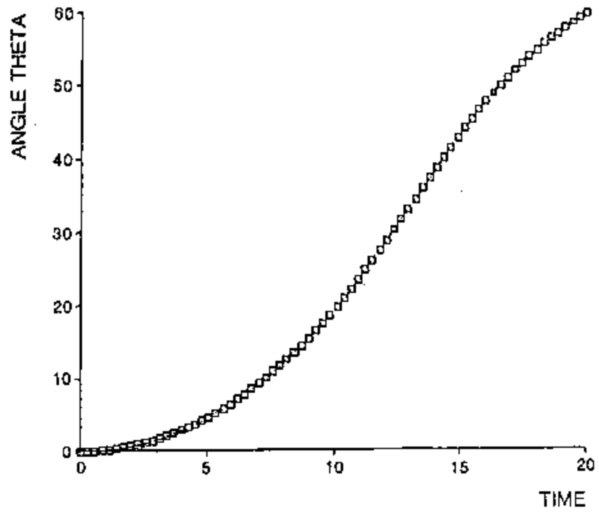


Fig. 3. Time history of angle of tilt

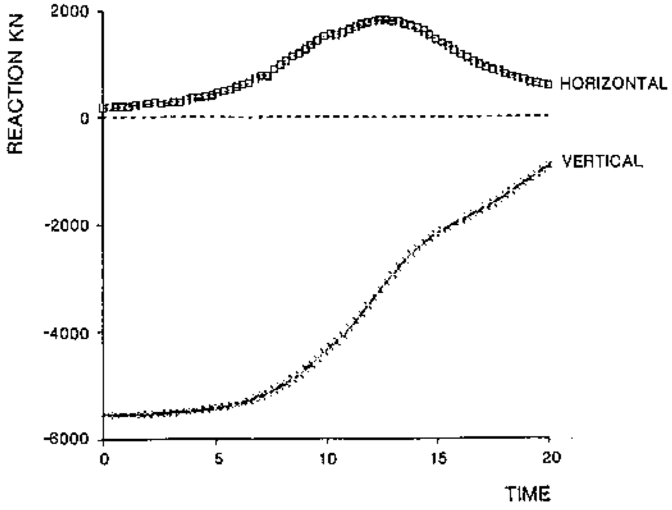


Fig. 4. Reactions at the pivot

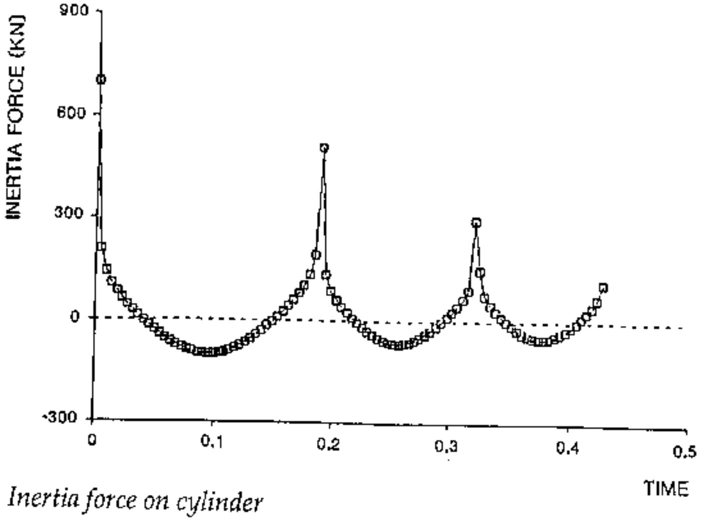


Fig. 5. Inertia force on cylinder

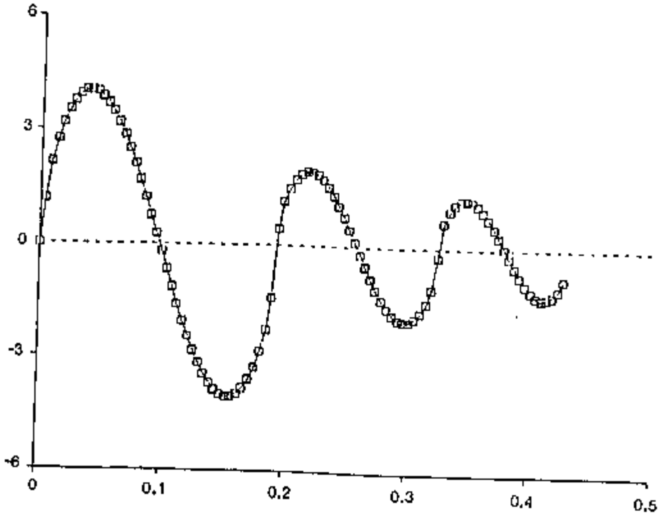


Fig. 6. Drag load on cylinder

The final set of analyses studied the effects of the explosive loading on members adjacent to the charges. The underwater explosion comprises an initial shock wave, leaving behind a bubble of hot gases; this rapidly expands, but thereafter collapses, re-compressing the gas which then may re-expand, giving rise to a second bubble pulse. This cycle of bubble expansion/contraction may be repeated as many as seven times. Ultimately the internal energy will be dissipated and the gas will disperse.

The structure will be virtually transparent to the initial shock wave, owing to the short duration of the loading event, and the majority of the structural response results from the water particle motions caused by the gas bubble. By mathematical analysis, it is possible to compute the hydrodynamics, and hence to calculate the member loads from Morison's equation. Typical time characteristics for inertia and drag loading are illustrated in Figures 5 and 6; it may be observed that the majority of the initial loading event has passed within 50 ms of the explosion.

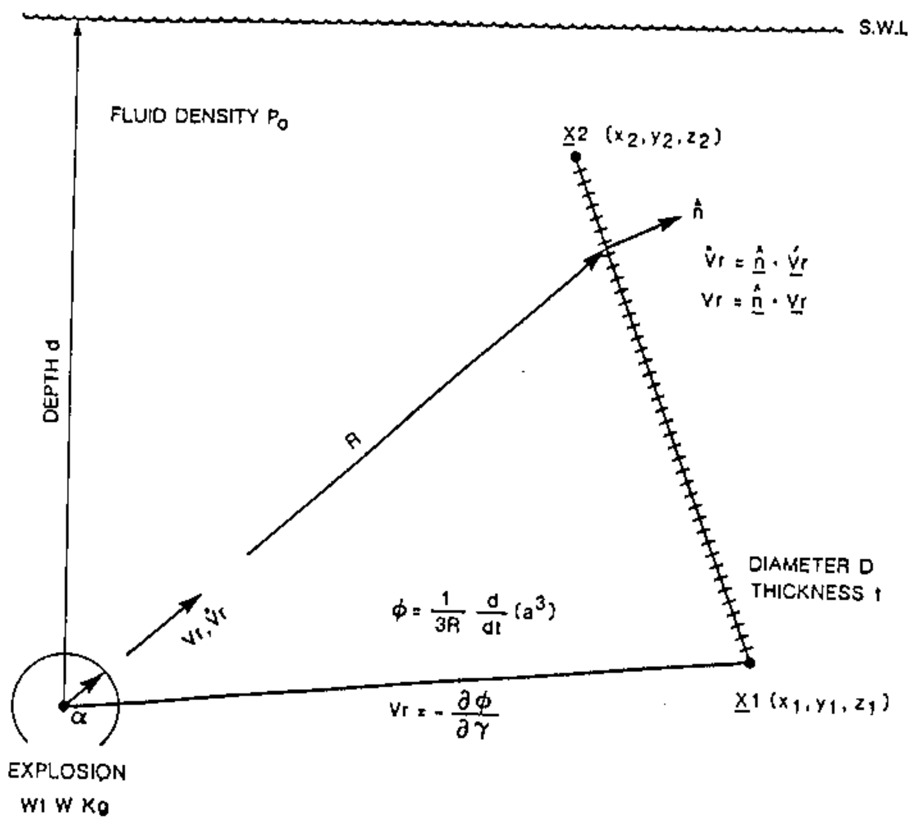


Fig. 7. Explosion loads on cylinder: notation

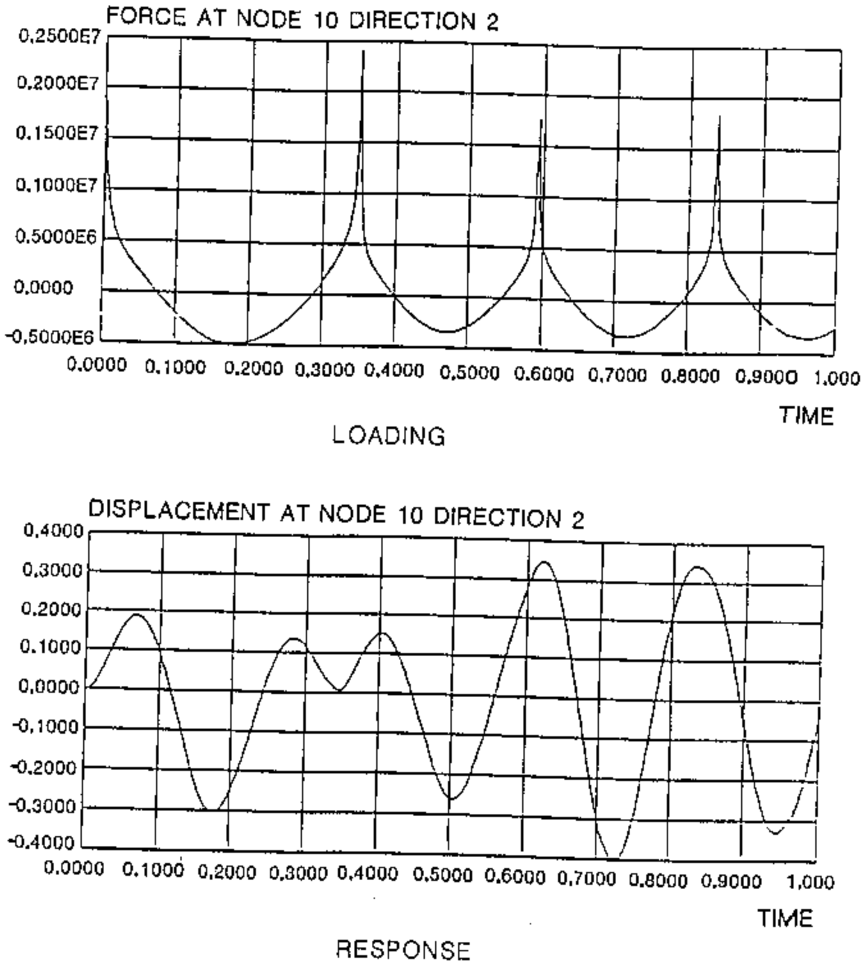
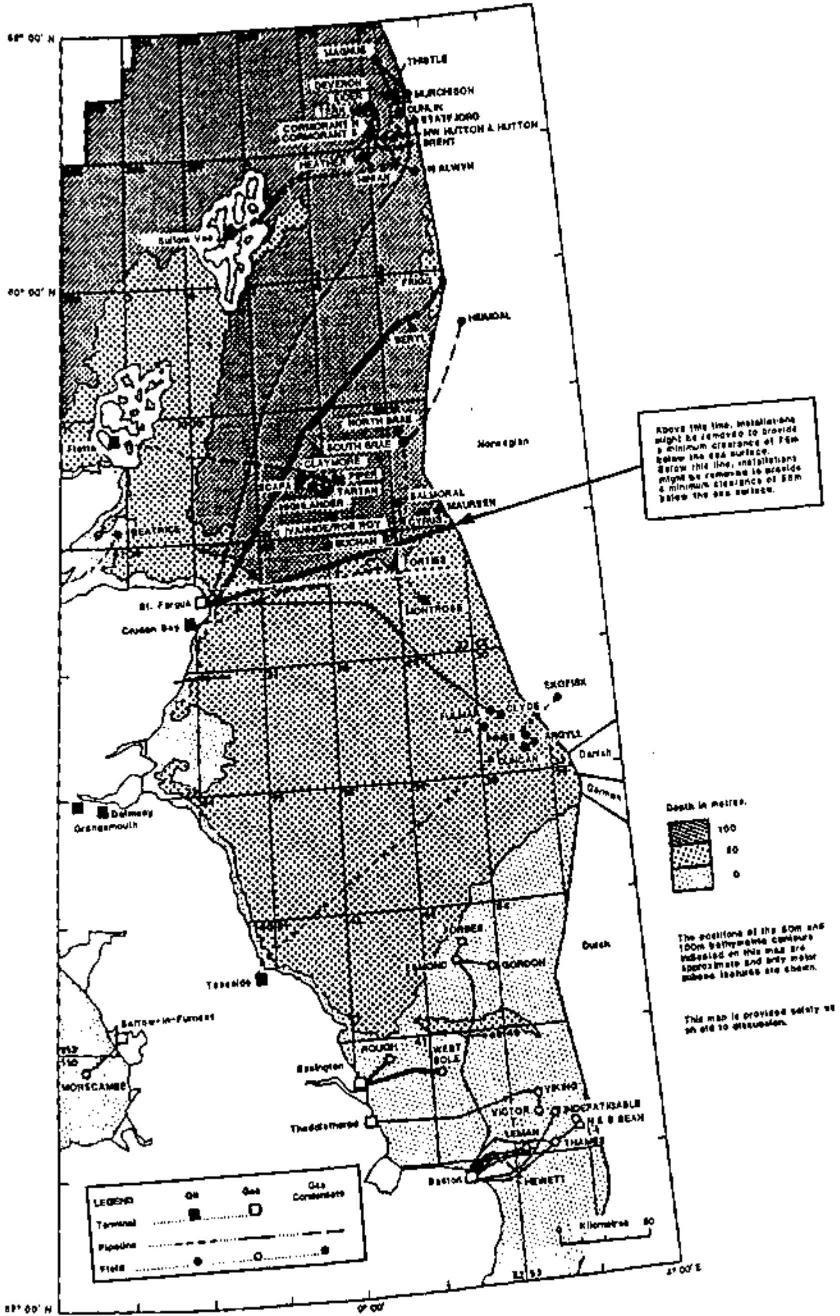


Fig. 8. Response of cylindrical member to bubble pulse loading

To determine the effects of the loading on the structure, it is sufficient to study the members closest to the charges, since the explosive forces decay rapidly with distance. Each member studied was modelled by a number of beam elements, and the effective loads, which vary both with time and with distance along the member, were applied to the model to perform a full



Above this line, installations might be removed to provide a minimum clearance of 75m below the sea surface. Below this line, installations might be removed to provide a minimum clearance of 55m below the sea surface.

The positions of the 50m and 100m bathymetric contours indicated on this map are approximate and only major subsea features are shown.

This map is provided solely as an aid to discussion.

transient dynamic analysis (see Figure 7).

Figure 8 shows the loading and response for Brace 'A' of Figure 1. The loading trace shows that the loading follows closely the water particle acceleration as shown in Figure 5, indicating that the inertia force dominates over drag. The peaks of loading correspond to times of minimum bubble radius when the bubble is re-bounding from the collapsed state. These pulses are repeated with decreasing intensity as the energy is dissipated. The bubble pulse period is about 0.35 seconds, which is longer than the natural period of transverse vibration of the member, which is typically about 0.2 seconds. The response of the member is shown on the lower trace of Figure 8. The initial impulse gives rise to a ringing response at the member natural period. The second pulse happens to occur at such a time as to reverse the motion and the third pulse gives the maximum displacement as it is reinforcing the response from the two previous pulses. The maximum displacement for this member at 10m from a charge is about 40cm assuming elastic deformation. It was found necessary to take into account tension effects and the formation of plastic hinges in order to produce a realistic prediction of the member response. Grouting this member reduced the response by about 25%.

A further result obtained from the hydrodynamics study was the pressure transient resulting from the explosion. It was demonstrated that members in the vicinity of the charges would experience peak pressures which are significantly in excess of the hydrostatic pressure. The risk is that the pressure transient could trigger hydrostatic collapse, and it is proposed that critical members should be flooded or grouted to avert this possibility.

Conclusions

In this paper the deconstruction of steel platforms has been examined, with particular reference to platform toppling. It has been shown that by a judicious combination of practical engineering and numerical studies, it is possible to engineer a practicable deconstruction technique. These techniques are currently being used by oil companies who are carrying out studies into platform deconstruction. Toppling is seen to be an attractive solution to the deconstruction and disposal of steel platforms, for sites where it is applicable.

References

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Discussion

The speaker was asked whether a risk analysis needs to be done in order to ensure that the jacket would topple first time. The speaker replied that it would and one may need to go to a specialist company. However he conceded that SLP did not do one in the study they carried out.

A delegate asked how easy it is to model test the method. The speaker explained that the bubble pulse load is based on potential theory published by Cole in 1949 and that the whole process is predictable, providing the explosion goes off. Care must however be taken to take into account free surface and sea bed effects by the use of 'image' sources and sinks.

British Gas plc

R. J. BROWN, British Gas, UK

Introduction

British Gas has for many years been in direct competition with electricity in the energy market. Now there is a Power Generation Directorate within British Gas, which includes both the generation and selling of electricity. This paper outlines the reasons for this change, how British Gas has risen to the opportunity to become an independent generator, and the challenges ahead.

Background

Electricity demand is increasing rapidly throughout the world. The annual growth rate in the 1980s was around 2-3% in Western Europe and the USA, and 6-8% in developing countries. These trends are expected to continue throughout the 1990s and into the next century.

Historically the primary fuel for power generation world-wide has been and remains coal. Steam is raised in coal-fired boilers, then passed through steam turbines and condensed. Efficiencies resulting from this process would be typically around 35%.

The principal alternatives to coal are as follows.

Oil

Oil has made an impact on the power generation scene, but the price rises of the 1970s and early 1980s have made the economics of oil fired generation unfavourable, and at the same time exposed its vulnerability to external events.

Nuclear

Nuclear energy was once thought to be the solution to the world's energy problems. But environmental concern over possible irreversible pollution has caused a severe setback to its development in recent years.

Hydro

Hydro-electric power is well established but its total contribution to meeting the overall energy demand is small.