

# Dan Rather Reports

**Episode Number:** 515

**Episode Title:** Where There's Smoke

**Description:** An investigation into what soldiers from Afghanistan and Iraq, and their doctors, worry is a major health risk. They say smoke coming from enormous trash fires is making them very sick. Also two views of the aftermath of the oil slick in the Gulf of Mexico: fishermen in Louisiana who fear their livelihood will never return, and Native Alaskans who are trying to stop drilling coming to their shores.

**TEASE:**

DAN RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TONIGHT, FROM U.S. BASES IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN, WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE MAY BE A MAJOR HEALTH CRISIS FOR AMERICAN SOLDIERS.

DARRIN CURTIS, BIO- ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEER

We understand there's bullets, there's bombs, there's those type of issues that we cannot mitigate. But the hazards that we can mitigate, why aren't we doing that for our young men and women in uniform?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ALSO LOUISIANA'S TWO MAIN INDUSTRIES COLLIDE. WHAT THE OIL SPILL MEANS FOR FISHING IN THE GULF.

THÉRÈSE CREPPEL

Everybody you know is a fisherman. Everybody that walks in that door - generations of fishermen. It would be like a big factory shutting down in a little tiny city - the same exact effect.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND OIL AND ICE, A NATIVE PEOPLE HOPE THE ENVIRONMENTAL TRAGEDY UNFOLDING IN THE GULF WILL MEAN OIL RIGS WON'T BE COMING TO THEIR SHORES.

MAE HANK

The ocean is our garden. It's our livelihood, our spirit. That's who we are. If anything happens to it, you know, that's like 80 percent of our traditional food.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE'LL BRING YOU THE NEWS. TONIGHT, ON DAN RATHER REPORTS.

**BURN PITS:**

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

GOOD EVENING FROM NEW YORK. TONIGHT, A MYSTERY THAT DOCTORS AND SCIENTISTS ARE JUST BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL. IT BEGAN WHEN SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN RETURNING FROM IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN BEGAN COMPLAINING OF BREATHING PROBLEMS. AND IT HAS GROWN INTO WHAT MAY BE THE NEXT GULF WAR SYNDROME, THE NEXT 9-11 GROUND ZERO DISEASE, MAYBE EVEN THE NEXT AGENT ORANGE. ALL OF THOSE MALADIES WERE INITIALLY DISMISSED AS FIGMENTS OF THE IMAGINATION. WE NOW KNOW THEY WERE ALL TOO REAL, EACH CAUSED BY EXPOSURE TO ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS.

IN THIS CASE, THE MILITARY INITIALLY SAID THAT THE SUFFERING SOLDIERS WERE ONLY VICTIMS OF COINCIDENCE. BUT THAT DIDN'T SATISFY A SMALL GROUP OF DOCTORS AND SOLDIERS. THEY'RE CONVINCED IT CAN ALL BE TRACED TO SOMETHING IN THE AIR...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THEY CAN BE SEEN CURLING INTO THE SKY OR HANGING LOW TO THE GROUND OVER MANY U.S MILITARY BASES IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN. BILLOWING CLOUDS OF SMOKE EMANATING FROM MOUNTAINS OF BURNING TRASH. THEY'RE CALLED BURN PITS, AND AT ONE POINT THERE WERE ESTIMATED TO BE HUNDREDS OF THEM IN BOTH COUNTRIES-- SOME SMALL SOME ENORMOUS.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

STAGGERING AMOUNTS OF WASTE ARE GENERATED IN MILITARY OPERATIONS. NOT ONLY DO COMMANDERS HAVE TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO FIGHT, THEY HAVE TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO DO WITH ALL THAT GARBAGE FOR EXAMPLE HERE IN BAGHDAD WHERE THOUSANDS OF SOLDIERS LIVE AND WORK, 100s OF TONS OF TRASH ARE PRODUCED EACH DAY. THAT TRASH INCLUDES MANY THOUSANDS OF THINGS LIKE PLASTIC WATER BOTTLES AND FOAM TRAYS -- ALONG WITH A LOT OF OTHER STUFF.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FOR YEARS MUCH OF IT ENDED UP IN BURN PITS. WE TRIED TO FILM THE BURN PITS ON A RECENT TRIP TO IRAQ, BUT THE MILITARY WOULDN'T ALLOW IT. MANY SERVICE MEMBERS HAVE SNAPPED THEIR OWN PHOTOS AND VIDEOS THAT THEY SHARED WITH US. THIS VIDEO WAS GIVEN TO US BY A SOLDIER ON THE CONDITION THAT WE CONCEAL HIS IDENTITY BECAUSE HE FEARS LOSING HIS MILITARY BENEFITS AND HIS JOB.

MALE VOICE

Balad Iraq June 12, 2006 and uh a particularly bad burn day.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BY FAR THE LARGEST BURN PIT WAS HERE AT BALAD AIR BASE. BALAD IS A TRANSIT ZONE FOR SOLDIERS AND MATERIALS ENTERING THE IRAQ THEATER. AND ITS BURN PIT WAS THE SIZE OF SEVERAL FOOTBALL FIELDS.

MALE VOICE

This is our lovely burn pit; they're burning plastic, metal, batteries. Anything you think of that gets discarded. They burn it and we breathe it.

RATHER

Was the burn pit the first thing you noticed?

DARRIN CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

And what did you say to yourself?

CURTIS

I said-- "I have a lot of work to do."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

RETIRED LT COL. DARRIN CURTIS WAS A BIO- ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEER WITH THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE. HE WAS SENT TO BALAD AIR BASE IN 2006. HIS JOB WAS TO PROTECT THE HEALTH OF HIS FELLOW AIRMEN. IN THIS, HIS FIRST TELEVISION INTERVIEW, HE TOLD US HE WAS SHOCKED BY WHAT HE SAW.

RATHER

What were they burning in the pits?

CURTIS

Every piece of trash that was generated on Balad.

RATHER

Rubber tires?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

Plastic?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

A wrote a list here. Styrofoam?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

Paint?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

Chemicals?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

Well, what else were they burning that you'd be concerned about?

CURTIS

Electronics. That maybe-- have metals-- tied to those. And-- and those sorts of things.

RATHER

Well, now, many of those are hazardous materials, right?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

Does-- does not the Army have regulations concerning the disposal of hazardous material?

CURTIS

Yes, sir. But there are certain regulations that are waved in a combat environment.

MALE VOICE

(Guy screams)

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WAR ZONES ARE TOUGH PLACES. MILITARY REGULATIONS RECOGNIZE THAT FOR COMMANDERS IN BATTLE, DISPOSING OF TRASH IS NOT THE FIRST PRIORITY. NOR SHOULD IT BE.

MALE VOICE

Yup, we are burning shit.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT WHEN POSSIBLE, THE MILITARY IS REQUIRED TO AVOID THE OPEN BURNING OF SOLID WASTE AND TO USE INCINERATORS. INCINERATORS BURN AT HIGHER TEMPERATURES AND PRODUCE FAR LESS TOXIC SMOKE. ITEMS CONSIDERED TO BE HAZARDOUS-- FOR EXAMPLE BATTERIES, LUBRICANTS, AND OIL -- ARE SUPPOSED TO GET SPECIAL TREATMENT. STILL FOR YEARS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN THE MILITARY HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN OPENLY BURNING EVERYTHING FROM POISONOUS PAINTS...

MALE VOICE

(pop) That's a round.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TO LIVE AMMUNITION, OFTEN ADDING JET FUEL AS AN ACCELERANT.

AS IT HAS FOR SO MANY SUPPORT SERVICES DURING BOTH WARS, THE MILITARY RELIED ON CONTRACTOR KBR TO MANAGE THE WASTE AT MANY BASES. IT'S NOT CLEAR WHO WAS ACTUALLY HANDLING THE BURN PIT AT BALAD. BUT FOR 6 YEARS THE FIRE THERE SMOLDERED DAY AND NIGHT, SPREADING ITS SOOT ALONG WITH ITS STENCH INTO NEARBY LIVING QUARTERS.

MALE VOICE

It drifts around; I wake up tasting molten plastic in my mouth.

RATHER

Now the soldiers. Were they living downwind? Upwind? Side winds from this?

CURTIS

Downwind.

RATHER

Which would be the worst place for them?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

And were any of the soldiers complaining about the smoke and the toxic plume?

CURTIS

I had constant emails. And if anybody knew what my job was, the-- the first conversation was always, "What are you doin' about the burn pit?"

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AFTER DARK WHEN THE TEMPERATURE DROPPED, THE SMOKE WOULD HANG CLOSE TO THE GROUND.

CURTIS

At night was probably some of the worst times. And it's hard to get pictures of-- of the smoke plume at night. And that was where a lot of the complaints come from commanders and such. That-- you know, "I came into work this mornin'. You know-- a troop of mine vomited last night from the smoke.

RATHER

Would it have helped at the very least to have moved the burn pit so the wind didn't carry the plume and the residue of the burn pit over the air where our troops were living?

CURTIS

That would have been optimal.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CURTIS WROTE A MEMORANDUM ABOUT THE PIT IN BALAD AND SENT IT UP HIS CHAIN OF COMMAND. IN IT HE SAID THAT IT'S "...AMAZING THAT THE BURN PIT HAS BEEN ABLE TO OPERATE WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS..." AND HE CALLED THE PIT AN "...ACUTE HEALTH HAZARD..." AND WARNED OF THE POSSIBILITY OF "...CHRONIC HEALTH HAZARDS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SMOKE..." HE LISTED AS POSSIBLE CONTAMINANTS: ARSENIC, HYDROGEN CYANIDE, BENZENE, SULFUR DIOXIDE, AND FORMALDEHYDE -- JUST TO NAME A FEW.

AS CURTIS' MEMO WAS CIRCULATING IN 2006-- DOCTORS STATESIDE WERE PUZZLING OVER A STREAM OF SERVICE MEMBERS WHO HAD BEEN COMING INTO THEIR OFFICES FOR TWO YEARS COMPLAINING OF BREATHING PROBLEMS. DR ANTHONY SZEMA IS A RESPIRATORY SPECIALIST AT THE VETERANS' AFFAIRS HOSPITAL IN NORTHPORT, LONG ISLAND.

DR. ANTHONY SZEMA

Most of my patients were 80-year-old white men. And all of a sudden around 2004, we noticed that there were young women and young men coming into our clinic. These were soldiers who were athletes, and all of a sudden, they're coming in for asthma-like symptoms, for lung injury type of symptoms.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR SZEMA WHO HAD STUDIED THE RESPIRATORY EFFECTS OF THE POLLUTION AT 9/11'S GROUND ZERO, RECOGNIZED SIMILAR TOXIC EXPOSURE IN THE SYMPTOMS OF THE RETURNING SOLDIERS. HE DECIDED TO RUN A STUDY COMPARING THE MEDICAL RECORDS OF RETURNING SOLDIERS, WITH THOSE WHO HAD REMAINED STATESIDE. HE FOUND THAT THOSE WHO'D BEEN DEPLOYED HAD NEARLY DOUBLE THE RATE OF RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS.

RATHER

Did you have any idea what was causing these respiratory problems?

SZEMA

I actually did not know. What we speculated initially was it must have been the sandstorms.

RATHER

So this is what you thought at first.

SZEMA

That's-- that's what we do. I didn't now what a burn pit was. Nobody had told me what a burn pit was. That-- that was our original premise. Yeah.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AT THE SAME TIME SZEMA WAS DOING HIS RESEARCH, PULMONOLOGIST ROBERT MILLER, AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY IN TENNESSEE, WAS ALSO SEEING A NUMBER OF SERVICE MEMBERS WHO COULD NO LONGER PASS THEIR PHYSICAL FITNESS TESTS.

ROBERT MILLER, PULMONOLOGIST

Almost every one of these guys that I saw initially should have been considered an elite athlete. They could run two miles in 13 minutes. And when they came home, they couldn't run two miles. They are short of breath with running. They're short of breath walking up inclines. They're short of breath walking up a flight of stairs. Some of them who had-- applied for jobs such as police officers were denied employment because-- they couldn't pass physical testing standards.

JENNIFER BLAIR



A half a mile, a quarter mile and I'd be incredibly winded like I'd just run a marathon so.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ONE OF THOSE ELITE ATHLETES WAS 29 YEAR OLD CAPTAIN JENNIFER BLAIR. BLAIR, A WEST POINT GRADUATE, WAS A PLATOON LEADER AT BALAD FROM JANUARY 2005 TO JANUARY 2006. DURING HER SECOND DEPLOYMENT TO IRAQ, SHE STARTED HAVING BREATHING PROBLEMS-- PROBLEMS THAT BECAME DEBILITATING BY THE TIME SHE GOT HOME.

BLAIR

I'm walking up the stairs, I'm walking to meetings, and I'm out of breath. And I'm not talking, like, out of breath. I'm talking, like, catch your breath, like, I can't walk and talk at the same time. I go to the doctor and I was like, "I can't breathe. I don't know what's going on. I feel like I'm having a heart attack or something's going on." And-- he, you know, felt it necessary to do some chest X-Rays and they didn't see anything that would indicate, you know, why a 20-some-odd-year-old person was having chest pains or having breathing problems.

RATHER

You went to West Point.

BLAIR

Yes.

RATHER

You don't get through there without intense physical training.

BLAIR

No.

RATHER

You were a runner.

BLAIR

Yes.

RATHER

Had you had any breathing problems before?

BLAIR

Absolutely not. I-- I don't smoke. I had run, you know, six miles a day.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BLAIR EVENTUALLY FOUND HER WAY TO DR. MILLER. AT THE TIME MILLER WAS EVALUATING DOZENS OF SOLDIERS WITH SIMILAR SYMPTOMS, AND THE SAME CLEAN X-RAYS. MILLER DECIDED THE ONLY WAY TO DIAGNOSE THEM WAS TO SURGICALLY REMOVE A PIECE OF LUNG AND RUN A BIOPSY. HE SAYS HE WAS STARTLED BY WHAT HE FOUND.

MILLER

It's-- it's a very significant lung injury. You-- you don't see this in normal people. These are the kind of changes you see in patients that have-- either toxic exposure or they have complications from organ transplantations.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MOST OF THE 45 PATIENTS HE BIOPSIED HAD DAMAGE DEEP IN THE LUNGS -- INSIDE THEIR SMALL AIRWAYS-- IT'S CALLED CONSTRICTIVE BRONCHIOLITIS. MILLER KNEW ONE GROUP OF SOLDIERS HE LOOKED AT HAD BEEN EXPOSED TO A KNOWN RESPIRATORY TOXIN FROM A RAGING SULFUR FIRE IN NORTHERN IRAQ. THE SECOND GROUP OF SOLDIERS HAD BEEN EXPOSED TO BURN PITS. THE DAMAGE WAS IDENTICAL. THAT TOLD MILLER THAT THE BURN PITS WERE THE LIKELY CAUSE OF THAT SECOND GROUP'S LUNG DAMAGE.

MILLER

I don't think that there's any doubt that if a soldier lived next to a burn pit or lived next to burning human waste, for months on end, and then they come home with lung injury, that the two are not related.

BLAIR

That's what's so frustrating about it is -- is that -- you know, doing normal daily tasks -- you know, going up and down the stairs and doing laundry, it -- it's a challenge now. Before I would have jogged up 'em with a little bit more pace, but like now, you know I'm out of breath and it feels like I just ran or did an extreme amount of physical exertion.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FOR THIS WEST POINT GRADUATE, IT'S MORE THAN A LOSS OF HER ACTIVE LIFESTYLE THAT CONCERNS BLAIR. THE LUNG DAMAGE LEAVES HER VULNERABLE TO INFECTIONS. FOR HER AN ORDINARY COLD NOW COULD BECOME LIFE THREATENING.

BLAIR

The biggest fear is-- is that something very small can turn into a trip to the hospital and hospitalized for pneumonia. And unfortunately, people die of pneumonia.

RATHER

You had a cold a few weeks ago.

BLAIR

I did get a cold a few weeks ago.

RATHER

What happened?

BLAIR

I-- I was absolutely scared-- If I get a cold, I could get bronchitis. If I get bronchitis, I could get pneumonia. If I get pneumonia, then all bets are off. So, I went to the emergency room

RATHER

Were you having chest pains?

BLAIR

I had chest pains-- I-- I get-- do get chest pains on a regular basis.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR MILLER BELIEVES BLAIR'S CHEST PAINS ARE A RESULT OF HER QUOTE, "TRYING TO BREATH THROUGH A STRAW." HE TOLD US HE CAN'T PREDICT HOW HER DISEASE WILL PROGRESS AS SHE GETS OLDER.

MILLER

I think this is a permanent lung condition. I don't think they're gonna get better. I hope that they're not gonna get much worse. But I don't think that this is a condition that you can exercise through or condition yourself-- against. I think that these people are going to be permanently limited.

MALE VOICE

The wind shifted -- it's blowing right into us. I want to show that were breathing toxic fumes. In case there's ever breathing problems or lung issues or anything like that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR. MILLER SAYS IT'S TOO EARLY TO KNOW HOW MANY TROOPS WILL COME HOME WITH LUNG DAMAGE.

MILLER

My concern is that there are thousands of people out there with this condition that are not being recognized.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND DR. MILLER TOLD US HE BELIEVES THAT THE BURN PITS CAN ALSO CAUSE FATAL LUNG DAMAGE. THAT'S WHAT HE BELIEVED KILLED 41 YEAR OLD STAFF SERGEANT AL GREENWOOD. DR. MILLER DIAGNOSED GREENWOOD WITH A RARE DISEASE CALLED HYPERSENSITIVITY PNEUMONITIS WHICH IS OFTEN RELATED TO INHALATIONAL EXPOSURE.

MILLER

He became symptomatic after being exposed to-- burn pits in Afghanistan. It did not respond to very aggressive treatment-- and he died before he was able to undergo lung transplant.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CLETA, IS SGT. GREENWOOD'S WIDOW.

CLETA GREENWOOD

Dr. Miller I think was a little perplexed as to how a young man as my husband could get that disease. The only thing that-- really was in Al's past was his deployment breathing in all the toxins over there, all the dusts, all the wind blowing all the time.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE DISEASE SLOWLY ROBBED HIM OF THE ABILITY TO BREATHE.

CLETA GREENWOOD

He had these incredible coughing fits that were just -- they were just scary. And you could see his face. You could see that he was just-- grasping, you know, just grasping for air. I sent over a healthy guy. I sent over a really strong man. He was physically strong, he was mentally strong he used to joke. He used to say, "I'm tough. I'm wood grain."  
(LAUGH)

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

GREENWOOD DIED TWO YEARS AFTER BEING DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN. BOTH DR. MILLER AND DR. SZEMA ARE SUBMITTING THEIR RESPECTIVE RESEARCH TO MEDICAL JOURNALS. THEY BOTH TOLD US THAT THEIR WORK IS JUST THE BEGINNING. SCIENTISTS WILL NEED MORE IN DEPTH STUDIES TO PROVE DEFINITELY THAT THE BURN PITS ARE THE CAUSE OF THE RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES.

RECENTLY, NATIONAL JEWISH HOSPITAL IN DENVER, ONE OF THE NATION'S LEADING PULMONARY RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS, GATHERED NOT JUST MILLER, SZEMA, AND OTHER SCIENTISTS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY, FOR AN ACADEMIC CONFERENCE ON LUNG HEALTH. THE SCIENTISTS MET TO DISCUSS THE EFFECTS OF BURN PITS, SANDSTORMS AND OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS ON SERVICE MEMBERS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN.

NATIONAL JEWISH IS NOW DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR FURTHER STUDY ON THESE WARTIME EXPOSURES. BUT DR. SZEMA SAYS THERE ARE SOME THINGS WE ALREADY KNOW.

SZEMA

We do know from the literature that burning these particular chemicals is harmful to your health. For example, if you burn 25,000 Styrofoam trays with breakfast every day and inhale it, we know that those chemicals are not safe for human -- inhalation.

RATHER

We know that.

SZEMA

We -- we know that there are certain chemicals that you shouldn't not burn. The idea of using jet fuel, JP8 to pour on trash and to light it on fire is very dangerous because jet fuel contains benzene, which is a carcinogen. It can cause cancer, so you don't want to be inhaling it. You certain don't want to be burning it and inhaling it. JP8 also c—contains n-hexane which is a neurotoxin, which may cause neurological disease. Even if you were burning wood fire, and it was just a marshmallow roast every day, the amount of smoke generates small particles called particulates. And high concentrations of particulate matter, is associated with death, with cardiovascular mortality, and respiratory mortality.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND THAT'S WHY DARRIN CURTIS WAS SO CONCERNED WHEN HE WROTE THAT MEMO IN 2006.

RATHER

You're an environmental authority -- medical authorities -- did they express any concern about this? Doctors, nurses who were there?

CURTIS

Yes. The chief of aerospace medicine -- whom I worked for, was very concerned about this also and actually cosigned my memo that I wrote in December of 2006.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CURTIS AND THE CHIEF OF AEROMEDICAL SERVICES, LT. COL JAMES ELLIOT WEREN'T THE FIRST ONES TO RAISE ALARM ABOUT THE BURN PITS. DOCUMENTS SHOW THAT IN THE SUMMER OF 2006 AN ARMY FLIGHT SURGEON WROTE OF "...POTENTIALLY WORSE HEALTH EFFECTS." FROM THE BURN PITS. AND A POWER POINT PRESENTATION BY MAJOR ERIC ANDREWS OF THE ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS WARNED, "POTENTIAL HEALTH RISKS FROM THE BURN PIT ARE HIGH." AND THAT "HEALTH EFFECTS FROM ELEVATED CONCENTRATIONS OF PARTICULATE MATTER-- INCLUDE INCREASED RESPIRATORY DISEASE, LUNG DAMAGE, CANCER, ETC." AND, AS IT TURNS OUT ALL ALONG, THERE WAS A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM SITTING RIGHT THERE ON BASE.

CURTIS

Incinerators were on site -- however they were not operational.

RATHER

There were incinerators on site?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

There were incinerators there, but they didn't get hooked up?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

Why do you think that was?

CURTIS

It was -- had to do with -- with funding and contractual issues.

RATHER

What did you hope to accomplish by that memo?

CURTIS

Well, my first thought was we will get the incinerators-- up and running. Let's-- let's-- let's protect the people that are gonna be there from now and the future.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CURTIS' SAYS HE NEVER HEARD BACK ABOUT HIS MEMO. AND DESPITE ALL THESE WARNINGS THE BURN PIT AT BALAD REMAINED IN USE FOR THREE MORE YEARS. AND SINCE THEN, HUNDREDS OF SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS WITH A VARIETY OF CANCERS AND OTHER DISEASES HAVE COME FORWARD CLAIMING THAT BURN PIT EXPOSURE MADE THEM ILL. TECHNICAL SERGEANT ANTHONY ROLES WAS IN BALAD IN 2004.

ROLES A FATHER OF THREE WAS DIAGNOSED AT THE AGE OF 28 WITH A RARE AND LIFE THREATENING DISEASE CALLED POLYCYTHEMIA VERA OR PV. THE PV IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS RECENT HEART ATTACK. A DAILY DOSE OF CHEMOTHERAPY IS NOW KEEPING THE ILLNESS UNDER

CONTROL. ROLES TOLD US WHEN HE WAS IN IRAQ, HE WORRIED ABOUT SUICIDE BOMBERS AND IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES -- NOT THE BURNING TRASH. ALTHOUGH, HE SAYS, HE WAS WELL AWARE OF THE BURN PITS.

ANTHONY ROLES

When it to got to where they were burnin' the plastic bottles, and the tires, and—and all the other stuff that they -- it would be black, thick, rancid, disgusting smelling smoke.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ROLES AND OTHER SOLDIERS WE TALKED TO TOLD US IT WASN'T UNUSUAL TO SEE BODY PARTS.

ROLES

You saw all kinds of things in there. You saw -- animal carcasses. You saw human limbs from amputations.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THERE HAVE BEEN NO STUDIES ON THE LINK BETWEEN ROLES PV -- OR ANY OTHER CANCER -- AND THE BURN PITS. IT WILL TAKE YEARS MAYBE EVEN DECADES OF STUDY TO SEE IF THERE'S A CONNECTION. RESEARCHERS WILL NEED TO PROVE THE RATES OF CANCER FOR THOSE WHO'VE SERVED IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN ARE GREATER THAN THE RATES OF CANCER IN THE GENERAL POPULATION.

BUT NOW ROLES AND HUNDREDS OF OTHER SICK SERVICE MEMBERS, THEIR FAMILIES, AND CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES ARE SUING KBR FOR THEIR ROLE IN MANAGING THE BURN PITS. THE PLAINTIFFS CLAIM KBR IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EXPOSING THEM TO "... TOXIC SMOKE, ASH AND FUMES..." WHICH CAUSED INJURIES SUCH AS CHRONIC ILLNESSES AND DEATH. STATEMENTS FILED IN THE SUIT INDICATE THAT INCINERATORS SAT IDLE AT A NUMBER OF BASES WHILE HAZARDOUS WASTE BURNED OPENLY.

LAST OCTOBER, AFTER THE MILITARY TIMES DID A SERIES OF REPORTS ON THE BURN PITS AND MORE SICK SERVICE MEMBERS CAME FORWARD, CONGRESS BEGAN TO ASK QUESTIONS. AND THAT SAME MONTH, ALMOST 3 YEARS AFTER CURTIS WROTE HIS MEMO, THE BURNPIT AT BALAD WAS FINALLY CLOSED.

WE WANTED TO ASK THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE WHY THEY LET AN INCINERATOR SIT IDLE AT BALAD AND WHY IT TOOK SO LONG TO CLOSE THE BURN PIT. BUT THEY DECLINED OUR REQUEST FOR AN INTERVIEW.



ON THE ARMY HEALTH INFORMATION WEBSITE, IS A REPORT CALLED QUOTE, "JUST THE FACTS." IN IT THE ARMY DENIES THAT THE SMOKE FROM THE BURN PIT AT BALAD WAS TOXIC. THEY SAY THEY STUDIED THE EMISSIONS FROM THE BURN PIT AND FOUND THE LEVEL OF DANGEROUS CHEMICALS QUOTE "...WERE WITHIN ACCEPTABLE STANDARDS..." AND THAT THE "...ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH RISK FROM THE SMOKE WAS LOW."

BUT DARRIN CURTIS QUESTIONS THE VALIDITY OF THE ARMY'S FINDINGS. HE OUGHT TO KNOW, HE HELPED DESIGN THE STUDY AND CONDUCTED SOME OF THE SAMPLING. IN HIS 2006 MEMO, HE SAID THAT HE WAS UNABLE TO GET ADEQUATE SAMPLES OF THE EVER MOVING PLUME.

RATHER

This Army report called, quote, "Just The Facts"-- they based that report in part on your sampling, did they not?

CURTIS

Yes, sir.

RATHER

But you don't agree with their conclusion?

CURTIS

No, sir.

RATHER

Now did the authors of that report talk to you as they wrote their report and put it out?

CURTIS

No, sir. I never spoke to anybody that wrote the report.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CURTIS SAYS IN MOST CASES, THERE ISN'T ANY EXCUSE TO STILL BE BURNING TRASH.

RATHER

To those-- and let me be honest and say, including myself, at least some of the time, who say, "Look, it's a war zone. Commanders are limited in what they can do. Their goal is to win the war. And what could we do with the trash? We did the best we could under the circumstances." What's your response to that kind of argument?

CURTIS

I don't know if it was the best that we could do. It may have been the decision that somebody made that we would do, but we have the capability.

RATHER

It's your contention yes; we are there to win the war. But we could do that and take care of putting the incinerators on instead of using the burn pits for a long period of time?

CURTIS

Absolutely. There will be a timeframe where you're gonna have to operate in-- in conditions that-- that aren't optimal. But at some point you know, six to eight years later you cannot stay, "I just arrived here, so we cannot put funding in to protect the health and safety of our troops. We understand there's bullets, there's bombs, there's those type of issues that we cannot mitigate. But the hazards that we can mitigate, war-- why aren't we doing that for our young men and women in uniform?"

RATHER

Well, why aren't we?

CURTIS

I-- you'll have to ask somebody else that question.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

THE COMPANY CALLING ITSELF KBR, WHICH STANDS FOR KELLOGG BROWN AND ROOT, CITED ONGOING LITIGATION, IN DECLINING OUR REQUEST FOR AN INTERVIEW. BUT THEY SAY THEY DID NOT MANAGE THE BURN PIT AT BALAD, AND WHERE THEY DO, THEY SAY THEY MANAGE BURN PITS IN ACCORDANCE WITH GUIDELINES APPROVED BY THE ARMY.

IN A STATEMENT, THE PENTAGON TOLD US THERE MAY BE SOME ACUTE SYMPTOMS FROM BURN PITS, SUCH AS COUGHING AND REDDENED EYES, AND THAT A FEW PEOPLE MAY SUFFER LONGER-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS DUE TO THINGS LIKE PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS.

PRESIDENT OBAMA RECENTLY TOLD MILITARY REPORTERS THAT HE IS AWARE OF THE ISSUE AND THAT QUOTE-- "NOBODY IS SERVED BY DENIAL OR SWEEPING THINGS UNDER THE RUG" -- UNQUOTE.

WHEN WE RETURN...JOBS IN LOUISIANA...FEAR IN ALASKA. THE FALLOUT FROM THE OIL SPILL IN THE GULF.

**THE FISHERMEN:**

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

WELCOME BACK. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN LOUISIANA'S OIL AND FISHING INDUSTRIES LIVED SIDE BY SIDE, UNEASILY SHARING THE SAME WATERS. THAT ENDED ABRUPTLY WHEN OIL BEGAN SPEWING INTO THE GULF. AND AS THE CRUDE LAPS UP ON SHORELINE AFTER SHORELINE, THE LIVELIHOODS OF FISHERMEN ARE SUDDENLY GOING UNDER -- BUT THEY'RE ONLY THE FIRST TO GO. THE JOB LOSSES ARE ABOUT TO SPREAD AS FAST AS THE SLICK.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE'VE ALL HEARD THAT OLD EXPRESSION ABOUT OIL AND WATER. TAKE A FLIGHT OVER THE GULF OF MEXICO NOW AND YOU'LL SEE EVIDENCE OF IT -- BY THE BARREL FULL. MILE AFTER MILE OF CRUDE, SWEEPED ALONG BY THE GULFSTREAM. IT'S DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE ALL THIS IS COMING FROM ONE SEVEN-INCH PIPE BUT NEARLY A MILE BELOW THE SURFACE THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT'S HAPPENING. THIS IS NOT AN OIL SPILL, IT'S AN UNDERWATER GUSHER. THINK ABOUT THIS -- EVERY DAY, FIVE THOUSAND BARRELS OF OIL FLOAT TO THE SURFACE. IN GALLONS, THAT'S MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND A DAY. AND NOT ALL OF WHAT YOU SEE ON THE SURFACE IS OIL. THAT SHEEN ON THE WATER IS FROM A CHEMICAL DISPERSANT USED TO BREAK UP THE CRUDE BEFORE IT RISES TO THE TOP. AT THE WELL-HEAD SITE, 50 MILES OFFSHORE, RESCUE AND RECOVERY SHIPS CAN BE SEEN WHERE THE GIANT RIG, DEEPWATER HORIZON, ONCE STOOD.

BUT WHEN YOU FLY AROUND FOR A WHILE OUT HERE, WHAT'S STRIKING IS WHAT YOU DON'T SEE. THE FISHING BOATS ARE GONE. THE WATERS FROM HERE IN LOUISIANA ALL THE WAY TO FLORIDA HAVE BEEN CLOSED TO COMMERCIAL FISHING AND IT COULDN'T HAVE COME AT A WORSE TIME. MAY IS THE BEGINNING OF SHRIMPING SEASON OR AS HOSEA WILSON CALLS IT "BILL PAYING SEASON."

HOSEA WILSON, COMMERCIAL FISHERMAN

It's a good season. Always was you pay your bills, you know you make your money, you

make money but you pay your bills, you catch up.

DAN RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT SINCE THE OIL WASHED ASHORE, CATCHING UP IS NOT GOING TO HAPPEN. HOSEA WILSON IS A THIRD GENERATION BOAT CAPTAIN, A MARSH SHRIMPER. HIS BOAT IS DOCKED RIGHT NEXT TO HIS GRANDFATHER'S. HE FISHES THE SHALLOW WATERS OFF PLAQUEMINES PARISH. BUT THESE DAYS ALL HE CAN DO IS WAIT - ALONG WITH THOUSANDS OF OTHER MEN AND WOMEN WHO MAKE THEIR LIVELIHOOD FROM THE SEA.

WILSON

Back in '91-'92 I put that on my arm.

ANDREW GLAZER

How come?

WILSON

I'm a commercial fisherman. I love it. I been doin' it all my life, I love it. Don't wanna do nothin' else.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

COMMERCIAL FISHING IN LOUISIANA IS BIG BUSINESS. THE STATE IS NUMBER ONE IN THE PRODUCTION OF SHRIMP, OYSTERS, BLUE CRABS AND CRAWFISH. IT ADDS UP TO A TWO POINT FOUR BILLION DOLLAR INDUSTRY THAT SUPPLIES A THIRD OF ALL THE DOMESTIC SEAFOOD FOR THE LOWER 48 STATES.

WILSON

If I couldn't get a job for the boat, might as well take it and put it in my back yard and make a swimming pool out of it. You could do all different kind of things with a boat, but if you can't go out there and work the seafood, it don't make no sense to have it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THERE IS A NEED FOR WILSON'S BOAT AND HUNDREDS LIKE IT. IN AN IRONY AS RICH AS THE CAJUN ACCENT, THE OIL COMPANY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LEAK IS NOW HIRING FISHERMEN AND THEIR BOATS TO HELP WITH THE CLEAN UP. BUT FIRST, BP WANTS THE FISHERMEN TO TAKE CLASSES IN HAZARDOUS MATERIAL CLEANUP.

TOMMY TYSON THINKS THAT'S A REAL WASTE OF TIME. HE WANTS TO GET OUT ON THE WATER NOW.

TOMMY TYSON, COMMERCIAL FISHERMAN

You got all kind of fishermen - that some fish here, some fish there. Give them fishermen them booms and they'll go close the areas off that needs to be. But, no, we all stuck in here and the guys that's down there is lookin' for people like us to go show 'em where to put the booms. That's the guys that needs to be in the classes and the guys that know where we're going -- let us go do it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SO MANY FISHERMEN SHOW UP FOR THE CLASSES THAT MANY ARE TURNED AWAY. THE LOCAL POLICE TELL EVERYONE OUTSIDE TO GO HOME.

POLICEMAN

You will not be allowed entry.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MEANWHILE, INSIDE THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO KNOW THESE WATERS LIKE THE BACK OF THEIR HANDS WAIT FOR LESSONS ON HOW TO DEPLOY THE BOOMS THAT CAN SLOW DOWN THE OIL SLICK.

TYSON

Who's better at puttin' booms out than us? But we gotta go through this - all kinds of paperwork when we need to be out there workin'.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TOMMY TYSON AND HIS BOAT WILL HAVE TO WAIT -- WHILE THE SLICK SPREADS.

TYSON

If they don't stop it off, how much oil's gonna come out of there? Fill the gulf up? Yeah today the wind's blowin' it on top of us. Mississippi's gonna get it tomorrow, then Alabama's gonna get it, Florida'll get it, Mexico'll get it, Texas'll -- 'cause its gonna go around and around the Gulf Stream. And just -- It's not just us, it's the whole nation. If we can't get enough people together to stop this, it's not just Louisiana, it's gonna be the whole gulf coast.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SCENES LIKE THIS WILL SOON PLAY OUT UP AND DOWN THE GULF COAST BUT THE ECONOMIC IMPACT HERE DEEP IN CAJUN COUNTRY HAS ALREADY GONE BEYOND THE FISHERMEN.

THERESE CREPPEL

It's just like Katrina to me, not -- not really gettin' a lot of information from out there other than a lot of fishermen that are scared.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THERESE CREPPEL IS THE OWNER AND CHEF OF LIL G'S RESTAURANT IN BELLE CHASE LOUISIANA, A REAL CAJUN DINING EXPERIENCE, COMPLETE WITH GUMBO, SHRIMP CREOLE AND ANYTHING YOU WANT FRIED -- INCLUDING THE PICKLES.

CREPPEL

Everybody you know is a fisherman. Everybody that walks in that door - the generations of fishermen. It would be like a big factory shutting down in a little tiny city -- it's the same exact effect. What do people do at that time other than leave and no one wants to do that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE CRISIS DID COME RIGHT IN HER FRONT DOOR EARLIER IN THE DAY WHEN AN OYSTERMAN STOPPED BY TO MAKE HIS LAST DELIVERY.

CREPPEL

He comes in he brings me six sacks of oysters and he says, "Well, Miss Therese, this is probably the last time I'm gonna see ya," and I'm like, "What?!" and he's like, "Yeah," he says, "with -- with everything goin' on, I won't be fishin' any oysters any time soon."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND WITH 95 PERCENT OF THE RESTAURANT'S MENU MADE UP OF LOCAL SEAFOOD, CREPPEL MAY SOON BE FORCED INTO A DRASTIC CHANGE OF CUISINE.

CREPPEL

So we got about another four days of oysters and then at that point we go to hamburgers and steaks.

WILSON

Ain't nothin' like a fresh Louisiana shrimp, nothin' like it, I mean if you ain't never had none, get 'em, because it might be extinct...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND WHAT WORRIES HOSEA WILSON MOST IS THAT AFTER THE WELL IS CAPPED, HOW LONG BEFORE THE OIL GOES AWAY? OR WILL IT EVER DISAPPEAR?

WILSON

We're lookin' at a couple years, maybe, no tellin' because of Exxon Valdez. They're still rubbin' oil off the rocks.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE EXXON VALDEZ SPILL HAPPENED MORE THAN 20 YEARS AGO AND THERE ARE STILL PLACES WHERE YOU CAN TURN OVER THE ROCKS AND SEE THE OIL.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN

That's oil...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND THIS GULF SEABED IS MORE VULNERABLE THAN THE ROCKY ALASKA COAST. IT'S A RICH, THICK MUDDY GUMBO THAT ACTS LIKE A SPONGE TO EVERYTHING, INCLUDING OIL. THE GRASSES IN THE MARSHLAND WHERE WILSON DROPS HIS NETS ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE.

WILSON

You don't know how they're gonna react to this oil, you know? It--it could kill -- it could kill all the grasses, it could kill everything.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND ONCE THE DAMAGE IS DONE, HE FEELS THE AREA'S REPUTATION FOR SOME OF THE BEST SEAFOOD IN THE WORLD WILL BE FOREVER TARNISHED.

WILSON

That's just like anything, you know, when you get a bad vegetable from a certain company or certain place - couple of bad vegetables, you keep getting that bad vegetable, what you gonna do? You're gonna go find somewhere else to go. And that's what's about to happen to us. We're about to be put out of business in Plaquemines Parish. You know this is where we was born and raised and this is where we worked at, and it's gon -- it's gonna hurt us bad, man, it's gonna really -- it's really gonna take a toll on us. Katrina took my daddy clean out of here, man. My daddy was a career shrimperman, that's all we did all our life, you know? And he had to move away -- and it just took him out of his game, you know, so I'm tryin' not to let this do the same thing to me.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

AND THE REALITIES OF LOUISIANA ARE THE FEARS OF NATIVE ALASKANS WHERE OFF SHORE DRILLING IS ABOUT TO BEGIN. THAT STORY IS NEXT.

**OIL AND ICE:**

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

FINALLY TONIGHT, WHEN THE ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER HIT THE GULF OF MEXICO, A DISTANT VILLAGE ON THE COLD, WINDSWEPT COAST OF NORTHERN ALASKA WAS PAYING PARTICULAR ATTENTION. THAT'S BECAUSE OIL DRILLING IS LIKELY COMING TO THEIR SHORES SOON. FOR YEARS, THE SMALL NATIVE ALASKAN POPULATION THAT LIVED THERE SAID "WHAT IF...", "WHAT IF A DISASTER HAPPENED?" THE ENERGY COMPANIES ASSURED THEM THAT TODAY'S TECHNOLOGY MEANT THEY HAD NO REASON TO WORRY. DRILLING IS POPULAR THROUGHOUT MOST OF ALASKA. IT BRINGS MONEY AND JOBS. BUT MANY NATIVE ALASKANS WHO LIVE BY THE OCEAN, AND FEED OFF ITS BOUNTY, DO WORRY, WORRY THAT THEIR WAY OF LIFE, ALONG WITH THE PRISTINE LAND AND SEA THEY CALL HOME, WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FROM WHERE MOST OF US LIVE OUR DAILY LIVES, THE NORTHERN SLOPE OF ALASKA IS LITERALLY AT THE END OF THE EARTH. ITS ICE FLOES... BLOWING SNOW... AND FRIGID WATERS... SEEM AT FIRST GLANCE TO BE A FORBIDDING AND BARREN LANDSCAPE. BUT THIS IS THE SCENE OF A RED-HOT BATTLE BETWEEN TWO GROUPS WHO SEE THE SAME ICY SEAS FROM VERY DIFFERENT VANTAGE POINTS. THAT'S BECAUSE THIS SUMMER, FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, OIL DRILLING IS SCHEDULED FOR THE ARCTIC WATERS OFF THIS COAST. ON THE ONE SIDE ARE A HEARTY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE WHO HAVE CALLED THIS PLACE HOME FOR MILLENNIA AND,



BACKED BY CONSERVATIONISTS, WANT TO KEEP IT AS UNTOUCHED AS POSSIBLE. BUT BIG CHANGE MAY BE COMING. PETROLEUM COMPANIES ESTIMATE THERE'S 12 BILLION BARRELS WORTH OF OIL BELOW THE ICE AND SEA. THEY'VE ARGUED FOR YEARS THAT THEY CAN BRING IT TO MARKET SAFELY - AND IN 2008, UNDER PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH, THEY WERE GIVEN THE RIGHT TO BEGIN DRILLING. THAT WAS THE STORY WE WENT TO REPORT IN EARLY APRIL WHEN REPORTER/CAMERAMAN LUCIAN READ TRAVELED TO ONE OF THE NORTHERN-MOST VILLAGES IN THE UNITED STATES. AT THE TIME, NO ONE KNEW THAT PERHAPS THE WORST OIL SPILL IN HISTORY WAS ONLY A FEW DAYS AWAY. THE ONLY WAY TO GET HERE IS BY AIR...THIS SINGLE AIRSTRIP IS THE SOLE PHYSICAL LINK BETWEEN THE 800 OR SO RESIDENTS OF THE TOWN OF POINT HOPE ALASKA AND THE REST OF WORLD. THERE'S DEBATE ABOUT IT, BUT MANY HISTORIANS BELIEVE HUMAN BEINGS FIRST CAME FROM ASIA TO NORTH AMERICA OVER THE BERING STRAIGHT 25,000 YEARS AGO, AND THAT THIS WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PLACES THEY SETTLED.

ROBERT GALLAHORN, RESIDENT OF POINT HOPE

Not many people know this but this place here has been known as the longest continuously inhabited region in North America. And a lot of people don't believe it. Because it's hard to swallow. How can a brown, small person keep such a land that's so rich for so long? The natives were so gritty and so strong that, that protective of this region.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

LOCAL RESIDENT OF POINT HOPE ROBERT GALLAHORN SAYS HIS PEOPLE HAVE SURVIVED IN THIS UNFORGIVING CLIMATE FOR COUNTLESS GENERATIONS. AND HE TOLD US THERE'S A LONG HISTORY OF OUTSIDERS COMING TO EXTRACT THE RESOURCES HERE, WITH LITTLE BENEFIT TO THE LOCALS. THE LOCAL ECONOMY HERE IS VIRTUALLY NONEXISTENT. RESIDENTS EKE OUT A LIFE THAT IS LIVED PARTLY IN MODERN-DAY AMERICA AND PARTLY IN THE ECHOES OF THEIR TRADITIONAL PAST. THEY RELY ON SUBSISTENCE HUNTING FOR THEIR SURVIVAL. THAT MEANS A STRONG ATTACHMENT TO THE LAND, AND EVEN MORE PROFOUNDLY, THE OPEN WATER.

MAE HANK

We use the ocean. The ocean provides for our people. And our customs in our culture revolves around the whale, it's our livelihood, our spirit, that's who we are.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MAE HANK IS A MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER AND TRIBAL LEADER, WHO FOR YEARS HAS BEEN HEADING THE FIGHT TO KEEP DRILLING OUT OF THE SURROUNDING OCEAN.

HANK

The ocean is our garden. If anything happens to it, you know, that's like 80 percent of our traditional food.

There's beluga, caribou soup and (UNITEL). Dana put some in that in that small little bowl there for dipping the seal meat, I mean the caribou in.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIS LONG HERITAGE OF LIVING FROM THE OCEAN IS WHAT OLDER GENERATIONS WORRY WILL BE LOST IF DRILLING COMES TO THESE SHORES. POINT HOPE SITS ON A LITTLE FINGER OF LAND JUTTING OUT FROM ALASKA'S NORTHWEST COAST, NOT ALL THAT FAR FROM RUSSIA. TO THE NORTH IS THE CHUKCHI SEA. IN 2008, THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION OPENED UP THE SEA TO OIL AND GAS BIDDING AND THE SHELL OIL COMPANY PAID OVER 2 BILLION DOLLARS FOR THE LEASE RIGHTS TO SEVERAL AREAS, DRAWING STRONG PROTEST. IN SEPTEMBER 2009, MORE THAN 400 SCIENTISTS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE SIGNED A LETTER TO PRESIDENT OBAMA SAYING "THE ARCTIC OCEAN IS ONE OF THE LEAST-UNDERSTOOD REGIONS ON EARTH." AND THAT THE DECISIONS TO GRANT OIL LEASING RIGHTS "WERE MADE WITHOUT SUFFICIENT SCIENTIFIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONSEQUENCES." THEN EARLIER THIS YEAR, THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE CRITICIZED THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES THAT ALLOWED THE LEASE SALE TO GO FORWARD. PRESIDENT OBAMA CANCELED FUTURE LEASE AUCTIONS IN THE CHUKCHI SEA AND OTHER PARTS OF ALASKA, BUT THE ADMINISTRATION ALLOWED THE SALES ALREADY FINALIZED TO REMAIN INTACT, TO THE DISMAY OF THE PEOPLE IN POINT HOPE.

HANK

When Obama got in, we had high hopes. But as it always turns out, the pressure of oil development is always an issue.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EVEN AFTER THE RECENT OIL SPILL IN THE GULF, THE SHELL OIL COMPANY IS STILL PLANNING TO DRILL THREE EXPLORATORY WELLS THIS SUMMER IN ALASKA, BUT THE PEOPLE OF POINT HOPE ARE NOT GIVING UP... THEY'VE FORMED STUDY GROUPS... PARTICIPATED IN PENDING LAWSUITS... AND LOBBIED WASHINGTON. THIS MEETING AT

CITY HALL IS PART OF A NATIVE ALASKAN ORGANIZATION TRYING TO RESTRICT OIL EXPLORATION IN THE STATE.

WOMAN (IN MEETING)

Once industry gets the foot in the door, that's how they operate. Their –their objective is just to continue to expand for profit. We're trying to protect what's left. Because the places that the industry are targeting right now are subsistence use lands and waters of our peoples.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IF THERE'S ONE RALLYING CRY IN POINT HOPE, IT'S SAVE THE WHALES, BUT NOT AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL TAGLINE. THE WHALE HUNT IS A RITUAL INGRAINED IN THE NATIVE CULTURE.

MIGRATING WHALES PASS CLOSELY BY THE SHORES AND A GOOD YEAR'S HUNT CAN HELP SUSTAIN THE POPULATION THROUGH A WINTER. MORE THAN JUST A SOURCE OF FOOD THOUGH, THE ANIMALS CARRY A SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE THAT EFFECTS EVERY PART OF LIFE. CELEBRATIONS THAT HONOR THE HUNT ARE HELD AT TWO SITES IN THE TOWN, AND WHALE BONES MARK THE GRAVES AT THE LOCAL CEMETERY, THE LARGE JAW BONES FOR DECEASED WHALING CAPTAINS.

ISAAC KILLIVUQ

This is my first whale right there. That's Sally, Isaac, and Jonah. And this my crew right there. When I first caught my whale I was so happy that I couldn't believe it. You feel like a king, you know? You feel like a king.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ISAAC KILLIVUQ IS A WHALING CAPTAIN WHO ALLOWED US TO ACCOMPANY HIS CREW AT THE START OF THE SPRING WHALING SEASON. NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS, SEAL-SKIN COVERED CANOES ARE STILL USED WITH HARPOONS THROWN BY HAND. THE WEATHER HAS TO BE JUST RIGHT AND THE MEN PATIENT, AS WAITS CAN BE LONG FOR THE WHALES TO SWIM BY IN THE RIGHT WAY. ROBERT GALLAHORN WAS ALSO ON ISSAC'S CREW.

ROBERT GALAHORN

If you feel that animal respects you, you'll feel better about hunting it, you know it's not like you gotta go out and "I gotta shoot that and I gotta shoot that, and I gotta shoot that, and I'll just take that and leave the rest. The animals know if you're that kind of a hunter.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES WHO HAVE LIVED OFF WHALE MEAT FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, THE NATIVE ALASKANS HERE ARE ALLOWED TO EAT AND HUNT A FEW OF THE ANIMALS, ACCORDING TO INTERNATIONAL TREATY. WHILE THE MEN WATCH FOR WHALES THERE IS VERY LITTLE TALKING, JUST THE SOUND OF THE WIND... AND THE WATER... WHEN A WHALE IS SIGHTED, THE MEN JUMP INTO THE BOAT AND PADDLE OUT WITH THEIR HARPOONS. THE BOAT GETS CLOSE TO THE WHALE, AND THE HUNTER STRIKES... IF YOU LOOK CLOSELY, YOU MAY SEE AN ORANGE BOUY IN THE MIDDLE OF YOUR SCREEN. IT IS ATTACHED TO THE HARPOON. AND WHEN IT STARTS TO SHAKE... THAT MEANS THE WHALE HAS BEEN HIT... BUT THIS ONE GETS AWAY. THE HUNTERS MUST BE CAREFUL IN HOW THEY HUNT, BECAUSE NOT ONLY ARE THEY LIMITED IN THE NUMBER OF WHALES THEY CAN LAND, THEY ARE LIMITED IN THE NUMBER OF WHALES THEY CAN EVEN STRIKE WITH A HARPOON. AND THIS DAY, PROVIDES A LESSON IN THE REASON WHY. EVEN IF A WHALE GETS AWAY, IT MAY HAVE BEEN FATALLY STRUCK. A FEW DAYS AFTER THE HUNT, A PILOT SAW A DEAD WHALE FLOATING IN THE OCEAN NOT FAR AWAY. OVER THE TWO WEEKS WE WERE THERE, THAT WAS THE ONLY WHALE THAT WAS HIT... EVERY OTHER HUNT CAME UP EMPTY. THIS HUNTING SEASON WILL CONTINUE, BUT THE MEN OUT HERE WORRY THAT EXPLORATORY DRILLING THIS SUMMER WILL CHANGE THE PATH OF THE WHALE MIGRATION AWAY FROM THEIR SHORES.

GALAHORN

If our animals start diverting their path or they don't want to come past Point Hope because of oil drilling, we'll be just another people on the streets that's looking for a handout. Because we can't hunt no more cause the animals won't come to us. I have to have money, yes sir I have a job, yes sir I do need that. But that's all secondary, compared to who I am. If I lose my identity as an Alaskan native, if I lose that I am nothing, I am nobody.

HANK

Economic opportunity is just one of their things they say they would provide for the communities and in the past 30 years, what we've seen with economic opportunities is maybe three to five out of our community will be able to get jobs. For me to believe economic opportunities, no, I don't see it, we've never see it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IT'S LESS THAN A WEEK AFTER THE OIL RIG CAUGHT FIRE IN THE GULF OF MEXICO, AND MAE HANK IS PACKING FOR A TRIP TO WASHINGTON, DC. TO JOIN A DELEGATION OF NATIVE ALASKANS. IT'S A CRITICAL TIME...

DRILLING IN ALASKA IS SET TO BEGIN IN A COUPLE OF MONTHS. THE GULF OF MEXICO OIL SPILL IS ON EVERYONE'S MIND... NOW, THE NATIVE ALASKANS BELIEVE IS THEIR BEST OPPORTUNITY TO STOP EXPLORATION. THEY'VE ASKED FOR AND BEEN GRANTED A MEETING WITH THE WHITE HOUSE.

HANK (ON BOAT)

Which side would be better to sit and see the water?

HANK

There's a lot of people in other communities, a lot of them are too quiet because you know, that's the way they were taught and raised is to not get vocal and harsh but you know you have to start doing it because if you don't there's no way you'd be able to protect your lifestyle. We can still say as people, as Inupiat, that we, we oppose it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN WASHINGTON THE DELEGATION IS JOINED BY REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE ALASKA WILDERNESS LEAGUE, AN ENVIRONMENTAL NON PROFIT THAT IS FUNDING THE TRIP. PETER VAN TUYN IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL ATTORNEY WORKING ON THEIR CASE.

PETER VAN TUYN

Anything he can do to help us stop the exploration in 2010 is what we're after.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

OUR CAMERAS WERE NOT ALLOWED INTO THEIR FIRST MEETING OF THE DAY AT THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR. BUT WITH THE GULF OF MEXICO CRISIS DEEPENING, THE DELEGATION KNOWS THAT OFF-SHORE OIL DRILLING HAS SUDDENLY BECOME ISSUE NUMBER ONE IN WASHINGTON.

VAN TUYN

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill is a very significant event and you know it really is gonna take some time to deal with and they're appropriately focused on that. But we have a lot to learn from that oil spill before any similar activity should be allowed in the Arctic and that's the message that these folks delivered to the secretary's office today. Time will tell whether or not they're gonna take those lessons and really see them for the Arctic.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE GROUP HAS AN ALLY IN ITS NEXT MEETING - WASHINGTON STATE REPRESENTATIVE JAY INSLEE.

JAY INSLEE, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE, WASHINGTON STATE

The science is totally unknown. And that's why I just do not think it makes sense to go into these very, very sensitive waters. Because an oil spill up here, we have no idea how to deal with it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THEN THE BIGGEST MEETING OF THE DAY. THE DELEGATION FINALLY MAKES ITS CASE DIRECTLY TO THE WHITE HOUSE, SITTING DOWN WITH ADMINISTRATION REPRESENTATIVES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATIVE AMERICAN AFFAIRS. GEORGE EDWARDSON, PRESIDENT OF THE REGIONAL TRIBAL GOVERNMENT IN NORTHERN ALASKA, PLEAD THEIR CASE.

GEORGE EDWARDSON, PRESIDENT OF THE REGIONAL TRIBAL GOVERNMENT

And this is the migratory path of the bowhead whales. And 23 endangered species- the animals use this as a migratory path. We desperately need your help. And we need to put a stop to this.

HANK

It's been a week since they started the spill, and just imagine that being under all our ocean ice. Right now our ocean off the coastline is all covered with ice, there's a whole blanket of it. There's no way they can clean it under the ocean ice. And you know if that is taken away from us, you take away who we are.

KIM TEEHEE, SENIOR ADVISOR, NATIVE AMERICAN AFFAIRS

We may not always agree, but your voices will not be lost in this administration, they will always be heard.

EDWARDSON

Yes, ever since I got to know Jodi, yes, I more than agree with you on that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DESPITE THE ASSURANCES, THE DELEGATION HAS NO WAY OF KNOWING WHETHER THEIR MESSAGE WILL HELP SWAY THE ADMINISTRATION TO RE-THINK THE LEASES IN THE CHUKCHI SEA. BUT THE MOOD AFTER THE MEETINGS WAS HOPEFUL.

EDWARDSON

Before the day's over, Obama will have heard what we have said. And that is the first time and the only time we've ever had this ability. I've been a president of the regional tribal government for finishing 18 years, and this year is the first time I can rightfully say yes, I did reach the president.

HANK

My perspective of the western society is that they tend to destroy lands and oceans. Look at history with the Indians down south in the lower 48. What did they ever gain from all of that? They never did.

KILLIVUQ

We are the last survivors... I say no, in my traditional way, Can't, you can't touch this. That's our survival, please, please let me hunt while I still can.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

AT THIS POINT, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW WHAT THE TRAGEDY IN THE GULF OF MEXICO WILL MEAN FOR THE OIL FIELDS OFF THE COAST OF ALASKA. THE ENERGY INDUSTRY CONTINUES TO ARGUE THAT DRILLING IS SAFE, THAT THE WATERS IN THE ARCTIC ARE MUCH SHALLOWER THAN THOSE IN THE GULF, AND THAT THEY ARE PREPARED FOR ANY ACCIDENT. BUT THE LAWYER REPRESENTING THE NATIVE ALASKANS SAID THE OIL SPILL IS A GAME CHANGER. WE WILL CONTINUE TO FOLLOW THIS STORY, FROM ALASKA TO THE LOUISIANA GULF COAST, IN THE WEEKS AND MONTHS AHEAD. IN THE MEANTIME, THAT'S OUR REPORT FOR TONIGHT. FROM NEW YORK, FOR HDNET. DAN RATHER REPORTING. GOOD NIGHT.