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Two die on rig at Pier 34

By Carter Thompson

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GALVESTON — Two men were killed Thursday night while working aboard an oil rig moored at Pier 34 off of Harborside Drive in Galveston.

Galveston fire, police and emergency medical service personnel worked for more than three hours to recover the bodies of two men who were trapped on a platform about 40 feet down inside one of the rig's legs.

GFD Battalion Chief Mike Varela said it was believed the workers suffocated while cleaning inside the rig's leg. An EMS worker at the scene said that the oxygen level in the leg measured at 8 percent. Normal breathable air is about 21 percent oxygen.

Donning oxygen tanks, firefighters were lowered down the top of the giant tube to the platform. Once they reached the

bodies, the bodies were lowered to the bottom where contractors had cut through the side of the tube.

Firefighters commented it was "hot and dark" in the rig's leg, and that oxygen levels were dangerously low. They said the victims were not wearing breathing equipment.

Pier 34 is an industrial pier that includes a vehicle handling terminal and manufacturing facility.

The rig, the Diamond Ocean Quest, was reportedly in port for routine repairs. The legs, which are typically filled with either seawater or drilling mud for ballast, were being cleaned and checked for subsurface damage. A firefighter said that the rig had been sealed for five years and had just been opened up Thursday.

Coworkers discovered the unconscious men shortly after 7 p.m. Firefighters arriving on the scene discovered the men were dead. At that point, the priority became the safety of the firefighters, officials said.

The identities of the men were not released. Varela described them as two men in their mid-30s. He said he was not aware which contracting company had employed them.

Varela said that it's standard procedure for workers to monitor air quality while working in confined spaces. "Whether the space had been monitored or not, I don't know. That's still under investigation," he said.