

Lest We Forget!

What do these dates have in common: December 7, 1941; November 22, 1963; September 11, 2001? They are all dates of events that everyone in the U.S. remembers. Unfortunately, they were tragedies — the attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. These are dates that we remember in the U.S. In other countries and cultures, the dates and events will be different and those above may be less memorable — after all, much of the rest of the world had been at war for several years before December 1941, and many other countries have suffered major terrorist attacks. Think about the important dates in your history and why you remember them.

What about July 20, 1969? Do you know that date? It's the day man first walked on the moon. That was a more glorious day in history but perhaps not as well remembered. We tend to remember the bad things more than the good. Remembering the bad can cause us pain or sense of loss, but we continue to remember.

It is the same with serious process events. Next month, it will be five years since the explosion at a refinery in Texas City, TX, that killed 15 people and injured 180. There are dates in every company's history that are remembered for serious events. Is there a ceremony to reflect on their anniversaries? Probably not, but they are as important as the release of the most successful products. Remembering them can be a painful experience, especially for those who lost close friends and coworkers, but we must remember so we can work to prevent similar tragedies.



President Kennedy moments before the assassination



A piece of the fuselage of United Flight 93 on Sept. 11, 2001



Aftermath of the March 23, 2005 Texas City refinery explosion

Do You Know?

- The process industries throughout the world form a common culture, defined by the kinds of industrial plants that we operate and the hazards of the materials and processes that we use. This culture crosses national boundaries. There are dates in our history that we must never forget. Two of those were remembered in the November and December 2009 Beacons – November 19, 1984 (Mexico City LPG terminal fire and explosion) and December 3, 1984 (Bhopal, India, toxic gas release).
- “Man seems to insist on ignoring the lessons available from history.” — Norman Borlaug, American botanist and 1970 Nobel Peace Prize recipient for contributions to the world food supply
- “We live in the present, we dream of the future, but we learn eternal truths from the past.” — Madame Chiang Kai-Shek

What Can You Do?

- Ask senior workers about incidents of the past. They do not have to be serious explosions, but could be process upsets that nearly caused an incident or process failures that caused a major quality or operational problem.
- Document the incidents of the past in a form where they can be easily revisited.
- Share these lessons with new people in your plant, from the plant janitor to the plant manager, so they all can learn from them.
- Use the log of past events during Process Hazard Analyses and other hazard reviews to remind everybody of what can happen.
- Read and share the Beacon to understand incidents that have occurred somewhere else, and what you need to do to make sure they don't happen to you!

“There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know.”
– Harry S. Truman, U.S. President

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