

A visit to the life raft factory

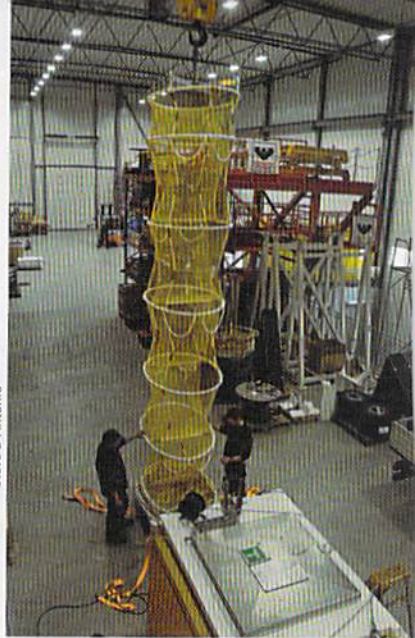
To the editor: Recently while cruising in Norway, I had the opportunity to visit one of the Viking company's manufacturing and R&D facilities located in Straume on Norway's southwest coast. When you hear the name Viking in connection with yachting gear, it's only natural that life rafts come to mind. The family-owned firm, now entering its 58th year, is well known for the rafts it manufactures; however, its pallet of safety equipment and related services is significantly broader.

Viking's range of products runs the gamut, with the largest sectors in the offshore

oil and gas industry as well as commercial shipping and the defense sector. These include life rafts; personal protective equipment such as chemical, dry and exposure suits as well as flight suits for aircrew and passengers; aviation life jackets; smoke hoods; rescue boats, lifeboats and launching davits; firefighting suits and equipment for both shipboard and terrestrial use; and offshore evacuation equipment, including slides and chute systems.

At Viking's Straume facility, the Safety Evacuation System (SES) is manufactured. The SES is an ingenious design, one that can be

Below, the work floor at Viking's facility at Straume. Right, one of the company's Safety Evacuation System units.



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deployed from either a ship or drilling platform, from a height of up to 265 feet and up to sea state 6. Once the cylinder-like fabric device is deployed, it automatically launches rafts at its base station, which remain in place until released by escaping personnel. Those using it do so by sliding in a zigzag pattern, thereby enabling a controlled, if somewhat uncomfortable, descent speed. It is both fire and blast resistant before being deployed, fire resistant after deployment, and capable of evacuating 200 persons in a little more than 12 minutes. Watching testing videos of the SES in use at the Straume facility, the speed with which people can move from an oil rig or ship to the rafts is impressive.

I've often wondered why lifesaving equipment like rafts and immersion suits are so costly. While touring this facility it became apparent why, at least in part: Much of this gear is handmade, and it is then tested and re-tested to ensure it works properly. In addition to the SES, one



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of which was being tested during my visit, the Straume facility also manufactures, tests and recertifies immersion suits, wherein each suit is pressurized within a specially made assembly and then checked for leaks. Repairs are also carried out onsite.

Viking has more than 2,000 employees worldwide, located at 260 service stations and 71 branch offices, with four manufacturing facilities in Denmark, Norway, Thailand and Bulgaria.

The 76,000-square-foot facility I visited employs 50 people, a mixture of engineers, sales, R&D and manufacturing/service positions. Viking claims their equipment has saved more than 4,000 lives — their website contains a “Survivors’ Tales” section, which makes for interesting reading.

Much of Viking’s efforts are in support of the petroleum industry. With its widely varying needs, Viking has developed region-specific research and development

for the North Sea, Gulf of Mexico, Africa and other regions south of the equator, as well as the Arctic. Viking was the first to offer a life raft specifically designed for use in the Arctic, and their SES escape system is also designed for high-latitude applications, with a heated option to prevent freezing on oil rigs operating in the winter Arctic.

—Steve D’Antonio is a marine system expert, writer, photographer and consultant. Visit his website at stedmarineconsulting.com.

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