MORGAN CITY - Two area men were among those rescued from a drilling barge that capsized in a bayou near here just before midnight today, leaving at least five crewmen dead and seven others feared trapped inside flooded compartments, authorities said today.

Nine of the 23-member crew were pulled from the water shortly after the 200-foot-long rig capsized. Two were rescued through a hole cut in the bottom of the rig by rescue workers, said Coast Guard Petty Officer Bruce Barton.

Divers found one body inside the rig soon after they began their search and others later as they explored crew's quarters and work rooms.

Among the identified survivors were Kerry Toups of Delcambre, 30; and Willie Johnson, 32, of Breaux Bridge.

Others named were Charles Taylor, 23, of Hazelhurst, Miss.; and Mike Lender, 27, Gilbertso, Ala. No other identities were released.

Taylor said by telephone from his hospital room that he felt OK, just tired.

"I feel pretty good. I just haven't had any sleep," he said.

"My company asked me not to discuss this with the press," he said.

Other than saying that he was among those rescued from the water, he would give no details of his ordeal. He said he is employed by Temple Drilling Co., operators of the rig.

His wife, Denise Taylor of Hazelhurst, said she was awakened this morning at about 2:30 by company officials notifying her that there had been an accident, but her husband had been rescued.

"I talked to him a little bit this morning, and he said he was all right. He wouldn't tell me if he was hurt, though," she said. "He said he was just a little banged up."

"He had his hand smashed once, but never anything like this," she said.

Rescue workers continue in the search for survivors at the scene near Morgan City where a drilling barge capsized early today. Twenty-three men were on board the rig at the time of the accident.
There are divers inside the vessel looking for survivors or bodies. The outlook is not very good for survivors. Two of the three decks are under water. Very little of the vessel is exposed,” said Keith Simon of Acadian Ambulance Service.

Coast Guard Petty Officer Keith Spangler said the skies over the scene were so thick with helicopters bearing sightseers and reporters that he had to establish a safety zone.

“We have rescue helicopters in the area, and we have diesel fuel in the water. You can’t do a rescue effort with people hovering 10 feet off the ground,” he said.

He said no helicopter would be allowed within a mile of the scene or lower than 2,000 feet. “This will be in effect as of right now,” he said.

Those pulled safely from the overturned rig were brought to shore in a boat and whisked away in an ambulance to Lakewood Hospital, where they and four others were reported in good condition.

“We have one patient who has a fracture of the right tibia (shinbone),” said Ray Rowell, assistant administrator of the hospital. The rest were either uninjured or less severely injured, he said.

Simon said the two rescued from the toppled drilling rig spent about five hours trapped inside the vessel. “They were exposed to some cold water for some time, but they appeared to be in good condition,” he said.

Advertiser photographer Peter Piazza, who flew over the area, said numerous family members were awaiting word at the dock for those crewmen still missing.

Mark Kugelberg, another Coast Guard spokesman, said the barge came to rest at a 45-degree angle, with only about half of its bottom deck and part of one side above water.

The rig is a 200-foot-long, 54-foot-wide barge capable of being raised above the floor of the marsh on legs like telephone poles.

The rig was identified as the Tonkawa, operated by Temple Drilling Co. of Houston.

“It’s one of those little marsh-type jack-up rigs built for shallow water,” Barton said.

Bayou Chene, where the rig overturned near the Terrebonne-St. Mary parish line, is about five miles south of Amelia, the nearest dry land. It’s about 10 miles from Morgan City, the closest major community in the vast marshes that merge with the Gulf of Mexico 10 miles farther south.

The St. Mary Parish sheriff’s office sent divers to the overturned barge and heard tapping noises from people inside. Later, voice communication was established and divers used torches to burn through the bottom of the floating barge to rescue two of the crew members.