

Heli Wopfner's great legacy: the petroleum industry in SA

Prof. Helmut (Heli) Wopfner
Born 26 June 1924, Innsbruck, Austria
Died 19 May 2021, Bensberg, Germany

Upon finishing high school late in 1941 Heli Wopfner was called up for war service in the Luftwaffe. He was a pilot, including the Stuka dive bomber, until captured by British forces in northern Germany in April 1945. He spent 11 months in British POW camps in Belgium.

After demobilisation Heli studied geology, petrology and palaeontology at Innsbruck University. His BSc (1950) was followed by geological work while completing a PhD (awarded in 1953) for which he investigated the northwest of Tyrol Mountains.

In January 1955 he married Dr Inge Wagner, a botanist engaged in erosion control research. They came to Adelaide in April 1956 where Heli joined Reg Sprigg's company, Geosurveys of Australia Ltd, which was undertaking oil exploration work on behalf of Santos Ltd. He immediately identified folded structures near Oodnadatta, leading to Santos drilling Oodnadatta-1, an important reference point in the search for oil.

In March 1957 Heli and a co-pilot, Dr Rudi Brunnschweiler, undertook an air and ground reconnaissance of north-eastern South Australia and western Queensland. They observed an extensive expanse of large, folded structures from Innamincka into Queensland. The subsequent structural contour map of the entire Santos licence area in South Australia and Queensland was published in 1958 and resulted in a partnership between Santos and an independent American oil exploration company, Delhi-Taylor Oil Corporation.

At the completion of his Geosurveys contract in 1960 Heli joined the Geological Survey of South Australia. He undertook many arduous field trips, often with Inge and their two children, into the desert to explore the geology of north-eastern South Australia and the Northern Territory. Heli had the responsibility organising inspections of company exploration activity in the desert for then premier, Sir Thomas Playford who would 'go bush' as part of his annual holiday. Heli led the field trips to visit remote desert drilling sites and geophysical survey teams with the Premier, other politicians, public servants and businessmen, reflecting the excitement about exploration and the economic possibilities that oil and gas discoveries would bring to the State.

Meanwhile, Heli was promoted to senior positions in the Mines Department which regulated company exploration work. With Playford's backing, Heli was instrumental in ensuring that Delhi-Santos followed up gas shows detected in Gidgealpa-1 with a second well. Fortuitously, Heli was onsite when the Gidgealpa-2 gas discovery was made on 31 December 1963, paving the way for discovery and development of the Cooper Basin oil and gas fields and the growth of Santos Ltd into what is now the biggest company based in Adelaide. The department's petroleum exploration activities and administrative responsibilities grew under Heli's leadership.

However, in April 1973 he resigned and returned to Germany to be the Professor of Applied Geology at Cologne University. Over the next 16 years his research work and supervision of postgraduate students involved the Dolomites, East Africa (especially Tanzania), China, Tibet, the Himalayas, India, Madagascar, Oman, the Malay Peninsula, and northwest Australia.

Nevertheless, Heli's connection with South Australia remained strong. He worked as a consultant for Western Mining Corporation and returned to Australia every year up to 1982, and intermittently thereafter: Heli and Inge last visited Adelaide in 2014 for Santos's 60th anniversary celebrations.

Even well into his 90s Heli maintained his passion for all things geological and continued to document the history of South Australia's petroleum sector (including Inge's descriptions of their field trips). You can read these amazing stories from a bygone era at the Department for Energy and Mines website. He died peacefully after contracting pneumonia. Inge had died in 2016. Heli is survived by Klaus, Helen and Barbara, and their 4 children and 2 great-grandchildren.