

Dr Helmut Wopfner—Biography

Dr Helmut (Heli) Wopfner is a native of Innsbruck, Austria. After war service as a pilot in the German Air Force he studied geology at the University of Innsbruck, concluding his studies with a PhD in 1953. Accompanied by his wife, Inge, and their baby son, he came to Australia in May 1956 to take up a position as Senior Geologist with Reg Sprigg's consulting firm, Geosurveys of Australia. Wopfner's first assignment was to produce a geological map of the Oodnadatta region on behalf of Santos. Assisted by Doug Scott and Andy Hess, Wopfner mapped almost 25,000 km² in six months. Wopfner identified several anticlines, which was the first recognition of fold deformation in the western Great Artesian Basin (now the Eromanga Basin).

During an air and ground reconnaissance of the Cordillo region and the adjacent Channel Country in April 1957, Wopfner discovered a number of large anticlines between Innamincka and Morney. He recorded six structures with limb dips of up to 20° on an aeronautical map. The same year, he and Rudi Brunnschweiler, using a single engine Sokol aircraft owned by Santos, carried out a 136-hour, low-level aerial survey of the Santos licence areas in South Australia and Queensland, producing the first structure contour map of the western Eromanga



Heli Wopfner (pictured right) and the late Doug Scott at an overnight camp north of Coober Pedy on their way to the Oodnadatta mapping area in June 1956.

Basin. Later in 1957, Wopfner supervised Santos' drilling program in the northeast corner of South Australia to demonstrate the continuation of the surface structures in depth. In 1958, he mapped the structures in Santos' Queensland licence area single-handedly and, when the first deep wells, Delhi-Frome-Santos Innamincka-1 and Betoota-1 were drilled in 1959 and early 1960, Wopfner was Santos' representative at these well sites.

In May 1960, after the termination of his four-year contract with Geosurveys of Australia, Wopfner joined the South Australian Department of Mines. In his capacity as Senior Petroleum Geologist, he recommended, in the face of strong resistance, the drilling of Gidgealpa-2, the discovery well in the Cooper Basin. He was on location as well site geologist when the gas flare from the discovery test was lit on the morning of 31 December 1963.

From August 1965 to April 1973, Wopfner was Supervising Geologist of the Petroleum Exploration Division of the South Australian Department of Mines. His team undertook extensive seismic surveys and drilling projects in areas of reduced interest, such as the Arckaringa and Officer basins, as well as basin studies in the Cooper, Pedirka, Murray/Renmark and Gambier basins.

In April 1973, Wopfner left Australia to accept a professorship at the University of Cologne, where his research concentrated on Permo-Triassic basins in South Africa, the Middle East, the Southern Alps, Tanzania and southwest China. He maintained close ties to Australia, which he still regards as his second home. He was the recipient of the 1973 Verco Medal of the Royal Society of South Australia, was elected a Distinguished Member of PESA in 1974, and an Honorary Correspondent of the Geological Society of Australia in 2008. ■



Wopfner quenching his thirst, after six months in the bush, at about 116° F shade temperature north of Oodnadatta in summer 1956.