



Having spent much of his working life in Papua New Guinea, petroleum geologist Michael McWalter has seen the development of the petroleum industry within PNG, and has come to call that country his home.

“I haven’t lived in England for oodles of time, so yes, PNG is very much home,” said Mr McWalter, Advisor to the PNG Department of Petroleum and Energy while attending the Annual Directors’ meeting of the Circum-Pacific Council, held this year in conjunction with the mid-October SPC/SOPAC Division’s STAR meeting in Nadi.

The STAR (Science, Technology and Resources Network) meeting is an integral part of SOPAC’s first meeting as a Division since becoming a part of the Secretariat of the South Pacific Community (SPC) in January this year.

The Circum-Pacific Council for Energy and Mineral Resources is a cooperative organisation that seeks to improve the exchange of scientific information about the geology and natural resources of the Pacific Basin and surrounding land regions.

Mr McWalter joined the PNG Geological Survey Petroleum Resources Assessment Group in 1987, just as PNG had “...our first real oil discovery at the Iagifu 2-X well, which subsequently became part of the Kutubu field. This was real black oil, and

I was there at the actual well testing. It was an absolutely enthralling time.”

The discovery was made about 500 kilometres northwest of Port Moresby in the remote Southern Highlands Province by New Guinea Gulf Oil, (later acquired by Chevron Corporation, when that company acquired Gulf Oil’s assets worldwide.)

“The New Guinea Gulf Oil geologists were good explorers,” said Mr McWalter. “When they found the real black stuff, they realised they had found something quite valuable: they had shown that PNG really had geological structures that could contain commercial quantities of oil.”

“These were extraordinary days, because after this discovery, every oil company in the world

was piling into Papua New Guinea. They were very exciting times, with a lot of licensing work, the delineation of the oil discovery, and the evaluation and approval of the first oil development proposals” said Mr McWalter.

By 1990, he had been promoted to Chief Petroleum Geologist, with a role that was very much involved in technical and operational review, the technical aspects of licensing, and the negotiation of agreements.

Shortly after, the Department of Minerals and Energy became the Department of Mining and Petroleum with two large Divisions: one covering mining and one petroleum activities.

“These were both really much like departments, and I was responsible for the geological work, technical policy and handling all legal and other affairs of the PNG Government in the re-organized Petroleum Division, which had its own legal, economic, licensing and landowner coordination capacities.”

Mr McWalter became the first Director of the new Division, in which there was a great emphasis on localisation.

‘We sought to progressively re-organise the Division and take on plenty of young PNG graduates. Then, we had a series of World Bank funded technical assistance programmes through which we deployed experts in all manner of disciplines to train the staff. Over the period from the mid-90’s through to about 2007 much learning was done, and eventually some 33 people had gone through Masters’ programmes, and a high level of competence was developed within the Division.”

Mr McWalter left his position as Director in 1997, and moved into the first of the Advisory roles he has continued to play for the Department.

“I stood down from being Director because of the emphasis on localisation, which I have always thoroughly supported,” said Mr McWalter. “After all, that is the whole point – to develop the local skills.”

In 2007, the Division made another transition and became the Department of Petroleum and Energy.

Prior to working for the PNG Government, Mr McWalter had completed, as he puts it ...“seven years apprenticeship in the industry at the coal face ...working as a Wellsite petroleum geologist for an American company, called the Baker Corporation.

“It was a tough apprenticeship, all over South East Asia and the Pacific, but I had exciting adventures throughout the region servicing the exploration wells of the company’s many clients.” Those adventures that took Mr McWalter to the Philippines, China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and also back to Papua New Guinea.

To join Baker, Mr McWalter left behind in England the beginnings of a promising career as a

PNG and petroleum – an indelible experience

Written by Administrator

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science teacher, having topped his class in the postgraduate course in Education in Physics at the Corpus Christ College, Cambridge, where he had previously completed his undergraduate studies.

This is the home of the Cavendish laboratory, renown for the number of its researchers who have won the Nobel Prize (29, up to 2006) and "...we literally did have Nobel prizewinners stepping into our teaching laboratory and expressing their wonderment with the way physics was being taught nowadays and how we applied technology to that teaching."

Mr McWalter's decision to pursue a teaching career was influenced by the many teachers in his family. But perhaps more importantly, after graduating from Cambridge, he spent two years in PNG with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), teaching at Fatima Catholic Mission, just outside Mt Hagen in the Western Highlands Province.

As well as teaching at the mission High School, Mr McWalter, "did everything one can, as one did in those days of VSO-ing. I ran the school canteen and mess for the 400 students, was in charge of a fleet of lawnmowers caring for the school grounds, trucked into Mt Hagen once a month to buy messing supplies for the school, and I still found time to teach half-a-day a week in the mission vocational school to the carpenters and trainees."

He said that his later connection with PNG through the Baker Company that led to his staying in the country was not planned, as he just as easily could have been sent to work in another area of the world.

"But yes, the PNG experience can be a bit indelible, once it is stamped in your heart and your passport; it is hard to shake it off."