

Zeitschrift: Swiss bulletin für angewandte Geologie = Swiss bulletin pour la géologie appliquée = Swiss bulletin per la geologia applicata = Swiss bulletin for applied geology

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung von Energie-Geowissenschaftlern; Schweizerische Fachgruppe für Ingenieurgeologie

Band: 15 (2010)

Heft: 2

Nachruf: Rudolf Hermann Beck

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Rudolf Hermann Beck

1919 - 2010

Rudolf Hermann Beck passed away on 20th September 2010, aged 91. We have lost a highly successful oil explorer, a dynamic leader, organiser and innovator and a visionary ahead of this time.

Rudi, as he was known in the oil patch, was born in the town of Thun, Switzerland, where he also went to primary school. Thereafter he attended the «Handelsgymnasium» in Berne.

His studies coincided to a large extent with World War II. Originally he studied economics and law, but after about two years he switched to natural sciences: geology and mineralogy. His Ph.D. thesis was «Die Kohlevorkommen des Kandertals». Parallel to his studies he served as an officer in the Swiss army (Grenadierkompanie 17) during most of the war.

In 1946 he married Silvia Cadisch, the daughter of his geology professor.

In 1947 he joined Royal Dutch Shell as an exploration geologist; his first posting was to Venezuela. Because of housing shortage in Maracaibo the field geologists and their families were then based in Trujillo in the Andes, far away from the rest of the Shell staff.

Rudi first surveyed an area along the Perija range west of Maracaibo, then he was sent out to map the Misoa Range (2'000 km²) east of Mene Grande, the oldest oil field in the Maracaibo basin. This was a very demanding task. In those days there were no roads, a few paths and little population in that highly dissected terrain which was overgrown by dense jungle. The geology matched nature in difficulty. It took Rudi two years to successfully complete this survey, in which he was greatly helped by his army background.

By that time the exploration geologists and their families were relocated to Maracaibo



and Rudi, after a training period in the oil fields, was back to field geology in the Venezuelan states of Tachira and Barinas and lastly in the San Luis mountains of Falcon. End 1954 Rudi was promoted to Chief Geologist for Eastern Venezuela and he and his family moved to Caracas where they stayed until late 1955.

In 1956 he was transferred to Shell's Head Office in The Hague, Netherlands, where he became Senior Geologist for Venezuela and Trinidad. After a training assignment with Shell Oil in the USA in 1957, Rudi was nominated Exploration Manager for Shell-BP in Nigeria, based at Owerri. Here he faced two formidable tasks, firstly to definitely prove the oil potential of the Niger delta and secondly to select the production concessions Shell-BP was permitted to keep after the exploration licenses expired in the early sixties. It was not easy for Rudi, nature and

money shortage hampered his plans. In the late fifties the river Niger used to flood its delta yearly for about five months to a depth of several meters, with the flooded area coinciding with what later turned out to be the most prospective region. So, drilling for discoveries was limited to a maximum of seven months per year, five months were used for concession selection exploration.

It was a time of low oil prices and funds for additional seismic parties were hard to come by as there was initially in both Head Offices some doubt about the oil potential of the Niger delta. Rudi gradually overcame all these obstacles and when he left Nigeria in 1962 he had fulfilled his duties: the Niger delta was proven to be a major oil province and Shell-BP retained the most promising onshore areas as production licenses.

After Nigeria Rudi was posted to New York as Production Manager of Asiatic Petroleum Company. Asiatic Petroleum Co. was Royal Dutch Shell's outpost in the USA as opposed to Shell Oil, which was an American company. In 1964 he and his family returned to The Hague where initially Rudi became Head Exploration Services. In 1966 he took over as Head Exploration, i. e. he was put in charge of Royal Dutch Shell's world wide exploration. In that position he remained for nine years during which he successfully guided Shell into a new exploration area. His main achievements were firstly the transformation of Shell's exploration organisation from a field geology oriented outfit to a subsurface, petroleum oriented unit; secondly he diligently led Shell and Shell-Esso during the opening of the North Sea for oil exploration and secured an interest in most of the great discoveries there and, thirdly, ahead of any other oil company, he initiated the exploration for deep sea petroleum. In this last enterprise he faced the problem of jurisdiction over deep sea wealth and of doubts about the possibility of producing any discovery. After nine demanding and successful years as the leader of Shell's exploration Rudi retired in 1975, aged 56.

He remained active as a consultant in both oil exploration (mainly Italy) and in mining (mainly South America) until 1990. After that he concentrated on his family and became a doting grandfather to his ten grand children. Rudi died on 20th September 2010 of the consequences of an accident. He is survived by his wife Silvia and by his three daughters.

E. J. Fränkl

