

Rick Wilkinson's



The Oil Patch



Obituary— John George Fuller, 1920–2003

Architect of the modern Australian petroleum industry

From national rugby union representative to accountant, to Prisoner of War at Kobe Prison Camp in Japan, John Fuller made a lasting impression on Australian life as, among other things, one of those who blew away the myth that Australia did not contain any oil, writes Rick Wilkinson.

John G. Fuller, oil entrepreneur and one of the founders of the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA), died a few days ago.

Last week's *Oil Patch* told of the anniversary of the Rough Range oil discovery in Western Australia and how it electrified the nation, making a lie of previous claims that Australia was too old to contain significant petroleum. The find spawned a renewed exploration effort in every State led by explorers firm in their belief that the country could become self-sufficient in its petroleum needs. In this context John Fuller stood out as one of the most passionate 'oil-at-home' crusaders.

Among the greats

An accountant/economist by training, a company director by profession and a geologist and explorationist by

inclination, Fuller was one of the architects of the modern petroleum industry in Australia. In fact, his belief that Australia should and could have its own oil reserves pre-dated Rough Range by several years and put him alongside Harold Raggatt (Director of the BMR), William Walkley (Managing Director of Ampol) and Maurice Mawby (instigator of early oil explorer Frome-Broken Hill) as can-do enthusiasts.

Fuller came to the exploration game by chance. Son of one of the partners in the Fuller Theatre group and a member of the Australian Wallabies rugby team, he had completed two years of a degree course in medicine at Sydney University before World War II intervened, whereupon he enlisted in the armed forces. His active service was cut short when captured by the Japanese and he spent much of the conflict as a Prisoner of War at Kobe Prison Camp in Japan.

Convert to self-sufficiency

It was in this camp that Fuller was introduced to the petroleum industry by an American Major and fellow inmate who worked as a drilling supervisor in civilian life. The Major had visited Australia in pre-war days and was familiar with some of the exploration programs of the 1930s in Queensland and Victoria. During long talks behind the barbed wire Fuller became convinced that

Australia must supply its own oil needs in the future. Not only that, but he believed it had the potential to do so. Upon liberation he returned home determined to put the theory to the test.

As a first step he re-entered Sydney University, changing his course from medicine to a degree in Economics because he felt this subject was more appropriate to the career in the resources business that he had recently set his sights on. He graduated in the early 1950s and also studied accountancy, gaining admittance to the Australian Society of Accountants in 1955. Then, his passion undiminished, he enrolled in a night course in Geology at Sydney University.

True grit

During this period Fuller met a laconic oilman from Arkansas named Gene Goff of the Lucky Strike Drilling Company who had just formed the Australian drilling company, Oil Drilling & Exploration (ODE) to drill in the Maryborough Basin of eastern Queensland. Fuller invested in ODE and acted as Goff's alternate on the board for a number of months. Nothing came of the Maryborough program and Fuller bore the financial penalties. Instead of discouraging him, the experience made him the more determined to stay in oil exploration.

He joined the Boards of various companies in the Associated Oilfields Group (AAO, Associated Freney, Papuan Apinaipi and Mines Administration) as well as the Board of Woodside (Lakes Entrance) Oil. In the latter case it was Fuller who persuaded Woodside to gain in-house technical strength by employing a full time exploration manager, rather than use occasional consultants.

Exploring with Planet

Not content with this level of involvement, Fuller established a private company called Planet Exploration in 1957, naming it after the Planet Downs Anticline in the Bowen Basin contained within Planet's first exploration permit. The company gradually accumulated acreage throughout Australia—on and offshore—with Fuller spending private money to run preliminary geological and geophysical surveys in such diverse regions as the Bowen, Sydney, Great Artesian, Gippsland, Murray, Otway and Officer Basins.

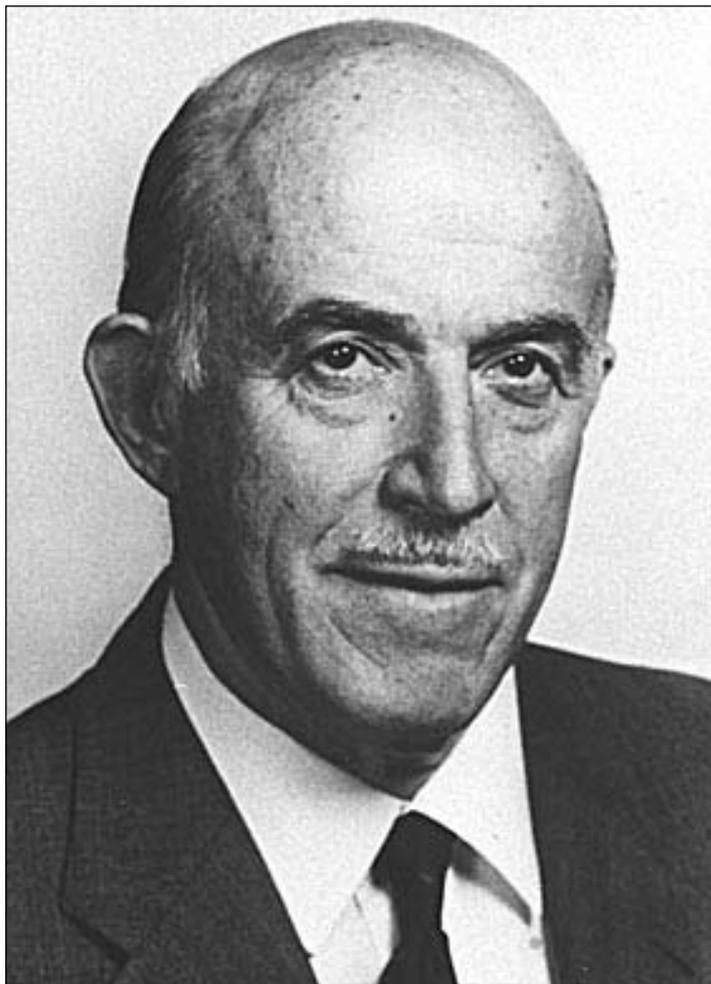
In 1958 at his own expense, Fuller traveled to the US for three months to become familiar with the American petroleum industry. His mission was to observe the workings of independent oilmen and their relationship with the major oil companies. Realising his company needed more funds to go past the preliminary exploration stage, he decided to float Planet on Australian Stock Exchanges. To facilitate this he obtained the backing of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) in which CSR would take an option on 30% of the proposed £2 million flotation of Planet Oil Company NL. In a piece of fortuitous timing the float, in early 1962, coincided with the discovery of oil at Moonie in southeast Queensland. The share issue was over-subscribed the moment it came on the market.

Charge of the juniors

For the next 10 years Planet, with Fuller at the helm, led the renewed

charge of junior Australian companies. He joint ventured with many of these explorers, including Woodside (participating in the Golden Beach gas find offshore Gippsland), Alliance Oil Developments, and Southern Pacific Petroleum.

Fuller was a true entrepreneur, always positive and with a reputation for honesty in that he always carried through Planet's stated programs in every detail. He drilled tens of wildcat wells in likely locations right across Australia, literally energising the country in the 1950s and 1960s with his enthusiasm. More to the point, he encouraged other



Australians to do likewise, inducting young people to the industry and embracing new technology to aid the search.

Getting the public interested

John Fuller was also instrumental in bringing the exploration effort to the attention of the general public, explaining the importance attached to Australia finding its own oil through a regular column he wrote during the 1950s in the *Australian Financial Review*. During his trip to the US in 1958 he

was already thinking about the need to bring the Australian explorers into an association. The aim of this association would be to give strength to thei explorers' argument that oil discoveries could be made and that governments should try to help for the good of the nation—not discriminate against their efforts.

He gathered charters from US petroleum and related associations to use as models for an Australian version and on his return was one of the first to suggest the formation of APPEA (then known as APEA because the accent was still on exploration). The preliminary meeting of the 10 companies involved in establishing APEA in 1959 took place in the Planet Group's boardroom in Sydney.

Fuller became one of the founding APEA Councillors and served in that capacity for more than a decade.

Forging opportunities

During his career Fuller forged opportunities in the Australian oil patch for a number of companies and individual explorers, either directly or indirectly through his entrepreneurial efforts. He had a genuine will and dogged persistence to ensure Australia's self-sufficiency in oil. The irony is that the exploration success that finally came in the 1960s and 1970s mostly eluded Planet and Fuller personally.

Although out of the game and in ill health for a number of years prior to his death this week, Fuller will be remembered as an instigator and prime-mover of Australia's upstream petroleum industry. In April 2003 he was awarded APPEA's Reg Sprigg medal for his services to the industry.

At a time when the country is facing a crisis in terms of liquid petroleum reserves reminiscent of the 1950s, his efforts are a model to be remembered and emulated.