

# ROCK LEGENDS

A GLIMPSE INTO THE CAREERS OF EXPLORATION, MINING & ENERGY VETERANS.



## Peter Mitchell

Director, Mitchell Group

In the first of our series of interviews with veteran mining and exploration identities, we're talking with the man who over half a century built his one-truck business into an international leader in mining and exploration: **Peter Mitchell**.

Peter gives us a personal account of how and why he started out, what the early days were like, and what he sees in the future for drilling.

### Q. How did you get started in drilling?

I started in 1962 during the oil boom, doing seismic drilling out in Blackall, Western Queensland. I was a young man needing work, so I applied. I got the job as an offsider, and the rest, as they say, is history.

### Q. Where have you worked, and who for?

Over the years I've worked for nearly all the majors, doing pretty much everything – coal, hard rock, oil, and gas. Other than Australia, I've drilled in India, China, Russia, Africa, PNG, Indonesia and the USA.

### Q. Where has been your favourite place to drill?

There are two places: Lake Tuggerah in the Hunter Valley and Chanute, in Kansas in the US. At Lake Tuggerah I spent five years driving in a boat to get to work. Chanute is in "Tornado Alley", which was an amazing experience for its landscapes and people – and its weather.

### Q. Why did you start Mitchell Drilling?

After learning the ropes for a few years and gradually being given more responsibility, I just bit the bullet and decided to go out on my own. Back then, opportunities didn't just land on your plate. If you wanted more independence or better contracts, you had to go and get them.

I bought my first rig, a second-hand Mayhew 1000, on the 27th June 1969. It cost me all my savings - about \$11,000. I made up the tagline, "Have rig, will travel", and just went around looking for work. I started out on peanuts – literally. I was drilling water bores for peanut farmers in Kingaroy.



**'I bought my first rig, a second-hand Mayhew 1000, on the 27th June 1969. It cost me all my savings - about \$11,000.'**

**Q. If you were down to your last drill hole, where would you drill?**

I've actually drilled that hole, many years ago. Millennium Coal/BHP had just dropped an area of tenements at Poitrel. A geologist I knew said the seam continued on after a big fault. I believed him and opted to drill for equity on this occasion. Proved up coal, rail loop and contracts. Today that project has become a mine called Millenium Mine.

**Q. If you could select one type of drill rig, what would it be?**

The UDR650, which is still a great rig to this day. I'm proud to say I bought the first one in Australia.

**Q. What do you think has been a great innovation in drilling?**

To me, the biggest game changer was the top end drive, multipurpose rig.

**Q. In your experience, who are the best drillers?**

I'd have to say Mongolians. They just seem to get out there, do the job, get the metres, look after the gear and appreciate the job. Australians are a close second.

**Q. Do you have any key advice for young drillers out there?**

They probably already know this, but it's important to remember that in mining, there are always highs and lows. This is one of the lowest right now. What you must remember is that if you can't grow it or it doesn't come from the sea, you've got to dig it up. Before you do that, you've got to drill. Look for opportunities, and make yourself indispensable for when they turn up.

**Q. What future improvement do you think could revolutionise the drilling industry?**

I'd like to see the day a driller doesn't have to sit on a drill rig. With no manual handling, our people are safer, the work's easier, and we could get quicker results. We could then focus more on whatever technical skills are needed to operate the new machinery, which would probably mean using software controls and controlling more rigs at once.

**Q. What's the most memorable moment in your career?**

I'll never forget... about 30 years ago while drilling in Blackwater, there was a very long drought. Farmers would chase the rig down the road asking for water bores. Bluff was about to run out of water - the mine and the town.

I got a call while drilling at Utah Mining to essentially come and save the mine. I arrived with a full water truck, then had to pump it all onto the pub roof so it could filter down and reach the tank on the other side of the building. The next day we went drilling for water to keep the town going. It really made me realise how important drilling can be.

The first Mitchell branded ute from 1969



**'If you can't grow it or it doesn't come from the sea, you've got to dig it up'**