

PhD Pioneers: The Living Experiences of The Open University's First PhD Graduates

Oral History interview clip transcript

Name of Interviewee: **Dr Michael Baker**

Interviewed by: **Elizabeth Currie**

Date of interview: **27/04/2021**

Important

The content of oral history interviews is personal, experiential and interpretive, relying on the memories, perceptions and opinions of individuals. While all reasonable attempts are made to avoid inaccuracy, interviews should not be understood as statements of fact or opinion endorsed by The Open University.

Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this transcript, however no transcript is an exact translation of the spoken word, and this document is intended to be a guide to the original recording, not replace it.

In some cases, interviewees may have made changes to the transcript.

Personal/sensitive information regarding individuals who may be living has been removed from transcripts where necessary.

Copyright and Permissions

Rights owned or controlled by The Open University.

All use of this transcript in part or in full requires prior permission from The Open University Archive.

Please contact university-archive@open.ac.uk to discuss possible use of the content.

phd_002_001_01
Clip 1

[00:04:50-00:09:26]

at the time the studentship was awarded, Chile was run by the left wing President Salvador Allende, but the week I started there was a military coup, which was a bit of a, put things back a bit. Military took over and they killed a lot of the left wing people and exiled some others to the, I might mention it later, but there was some uncertainty for several months as to whether the project could go ahead. By the middle of 19-, so I started the PhD in September '73, so by middle of '74 it was decided it could go ahead, so we bought a Land Rover in the UK painted Open University Andean Volcanoes Project on the side of it and went on an expedition basis where you asked various companies if they'd like to donate any goods and we ended up with quite a lot of detergent and tinned food. And you might think why would we want detergent?

But it proved when we got Chile a very useful bartering tool, because at the time the Chilean economy was flat broke and the area we were looking at was very distant from the capital, so they were very short of things like detergent. So detergent paid for keeping all our stuff safe while we were there. As I say the PhD project was run as a scientific expedition and there were two main field trips; one in the second half of 1974, which lasted three and a half months. So the Land Rover, everything had to be self-sufficient, so the Land Rover was full of spare parts, food, anything we couldn't get locally, because the area we were looking at was very remote and it was a day's drive to anywhere, so we had to service equipment ourselves.

For the first trip there were three of us; myself, my supervisor, Peter Francis, and another lecturer, Richard Thorpe. Because the terrain was very unsuitable for pitching a tent, we all had to sleep in the Land Rover. Someone in the front seat, someone in the back seat, someone in the back, because the area was quite high, most of the terrain was between 3,500m and 5,500m and it was pretty cold at night, -10, -20, and quite cold during the day. The procedure was really to, because of the lack of oxygen we had to, all cooking had to be done in a pressure cooker, which we had in the back of the Land Rover. There was a rather more cavalier attitude to risk assessment then. The first trip was quite eventful, getting used to, partly because the military were paranoid about left wing guerrillas infiltrating Northern Chile from Bolivia, so it was shades of Che Guevara, but he wasn't around at the time fortunately.

So they marked out a lot of areas as minefields. Because of the climate, because it's very arid and strong ultraviolet undisturbed ground develops a very thin skin. You can tell if anyone's dug anything, so you could tell where they'd just marked out the minefields and hadn't planted any mines in them. And a couple of times we were told off by the Chilean army patrols for driving over their minefields. In fact on one occasion they drove over their minefield to tell us off for driving over their minefield. It was a bit surreal, but several years later we discovered they had actually planted mines, but not in the minefields.