

The Capital

Top Stories

Legendary National Geo photographer, writer dies at 75

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

Tom Abercrombie never got to finish his last earthly adventure.

The retired *National Geographic* magazine photographer and writer - who traveled the globe from Antarctica to the Amazon by Land Rover, camel, plane and yak - had set about building a skipjack in the barn of his Shady Side home.

He died yesterday of complications following heart surgery. Mr. Abercrombie was 75.

He and his wife, Marilyn, were married in 1952 and lived in Shady Side for 40 years when he, or the both of them, were not off on assignment.

Mr. Abercrombie was well-known in local circles and easily recognized by his white beard, ever-present pipe and the impish glint in his eye.

He started his career with *National Geographic* in 1956. His first assignment was a piece on the Chesapeake Bay and the travels of Capt. John Smith. A year later he was the first journalist to make it to the South Pole, a trip that became more of an adventure than he bargained for: he was stranded for three weeks when his airplane froze.

Friends were devastated at the news of his passing following aortal valve replacement surgery at Johns Hopkins Medical Center.

"It is like a mountain has fallen," said Marlin Fitzwater, former press secretary for president George H.W. Bush, who befriended Mr. Abercrombie after moving to south county.

"We all knew him as nearly an indestructible personality who can do anything with flair and dignity. A rare combination of a physical man who has roamed the globe . . . who knows how to work with wood and boats and tractors, all the physical things of life," Mr. Fitzwater said. "And yet his writing was as gentle as a flower."

Mr. Abercrombie's work in journalism began in newspapers, and he won the Newspaper Photographer of the Year in 1954 while working at the *Milwaukee Journal*. Five years later, he won the Magazine Photographer of the Year. He was the first photojournalist to win both awards.



Retired National Geographic photographer writer Thomas Abercrombie works on a skipjack in the barn at his home.
Capital file photo by G. Nick Lundskow

His career took off from there. First as a photographer, then as a writer. By the time Mr. Abercrombie was done, he had written stories from every continent.

His editor at both publications, Bob Gilka, saw it early on. "It was obvious when I saw his work. He had such talent . . ." Mr. Gilka told *The Capital* for a story about his colleague in 2002. "He's the original Renaissance man. He (spoke) five languages, (was) well-read, multitalented . . . and an early expert in 35mm photography."

His exploits were legendary. He was a swashbuckling adventurer, like Indiana Jones with a camera and a pen.

Working for the magazine in its heyday, he had free rein much to the chagrin of home office bean counters.

"It was such a joy. Once you were out there it was your show," he told *The Capital* in 2002.

While running around North Yemen during that country's civil war he bought two AK-47's and put them down on his expense report as "auto insurance."

For an Alaska assignment, he bought a plane and flew it north from Lee Airport in Edgewater. Once in Alaska, he had pontoons put on it, then flew it back home landing on West River and tying it up at the house. He called the office and told them the plane he expensed could be picked up there.

And there were lot of close calls, too, like nearly plunging into a 1,000-foot chasm in Afghanistan when he slipped off his yak.

Or nearly dying from typhoid in the Himalayas.

An angry mob in a napalmed Cambodian village would have done the trick if they had figured out he was an American, but he managed to convince them he was a Frenchman.

Then he got knocked off the top of a mountain cable car in Venezuela and was saved by a stout Swiss guide who yanked him back into the car by his belt. A good-sized divot creased the bridge of his nose from that one.

It was his travels in the Middle East that built his reputation, that captured his imagination and a piece of his soul. He became the magazine's man in the region.

Over 25 years, he wove history, anthropology, politics and religion into a familiar first-person style. He wrote of ancient Egypt and the cradle of civilization in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, of the pilgrimage to Mecca and modern Saudi superhighways built with petrodollars.

"He wrote about every country in the region, except Libya, because they would not let him in," said Mrs. Abercrombie, known as Lynn.

Along the road he took the faith of Islam and four times made the hadj to Mecca. He said the perspective Americans have of Islam, especially since Sept. 11, is distorted and does not represent what he came to know of the region and its people.

"Muhammad would not give those guys the time of day," he said in 2002.

Ron Wolfe of Deale, met Mr. Abercrombie while he was an undergraduate student in the 1960s when the photographer-writer gave a lecture on the Middle East at Constituion Hall.

"I hung around and got to meet him. Later in 1967, he and I and a Jewish guy formed the Ad Hoc Committee on the Middle East trying to advocate for an even-handed American policy in the Middle East. You can see we didn't have much luck there."

After moving to Deale eight years ago, Mr. Wolfe got close to Mr. Abercrombie and with Mr. Fitzwater formed an unofficial dining club dubbed the Lunch Bunch, meeting regularly at Shannon's Restaurant in Shady Side.

"It is just a rotten, rotten thing," Mr. Wolfe said. "I did not have enough time with that guy."

That is what others were saying as the news spread.

The second thing people were saying to each other was, "Who is going to finish his boat?"

Born Thomas J. Abercrombie on Aug. 13, 1930 in Stillwater, Minn., he was the son of Beth and J.A.D. Abercrombie.

After graduating high school he left home and after a brief stint in the Army, attended McAllister College before landing a photographer's job at the *Fargo Forum* in 1952.

A year later he got an internship at the *Milwaukee Journal* that led to an award winning job there then his career at *National Geographic*.

He is survived by his wife, Marilyn of Shady Side; daughter Mari Abercrombie of Newburg, Maine; son Bruce Abercrombie of Shady Side and two grandchildren.

Memorial service arrangements were incomplete this morning.

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