

The Capital

Top Stories

National Geographic pays tribute to late Shady Side photojournalist

By E.B. FURGURSON, III Staff Writer

National Geographic has honored one of its legendary photojournalists, Shady Side's Tom Abercrombie, with a story in its August edition.

The 12-page spread features several of his photographs, along with others, some shot by Lynn Abercrombie, his wife and traveling companion of 54 years.

Mr. Abercrombie died earlier this year of complications following heart surgery.

Mrs. Abercrombie and her two children, Bruce Abercrombie of Shady Side and Mari Abercrombie of Maine, are deeply moved by the tribute.

"We are of course thrilled," Mari Abercrombie said in a phone interview during the middle of a musical session at the day camp she runs. "I look at the magazine and see his name, and think of the tribute ... It really means a lot. He gave his life to the magazine, but the magazine gave us all a life extraordinaire. It is just beautiful."

In the article, Senior Editor Don Belt writes that his old friend picked up photography at age 15 when his older brother, a World War II pilot just back from the war, brought home a German camera.

"Later," Mr. Belt writes, "he borrowed his brother's Leica, made a drawing of it, and built a camera out of mirrors, a discarded lens and scraps of plastic. His first photograph was of his girlfriend, Lynn."

Another tribute is in the works at the Museum of Photographic Arts in Tampa, Fla.

"They are doing an exhibition of about 50 photographs," Lynn Abercrombie said.



Photo courtesy of National Geographic Magazine

The late Tom Abercrombie traveled the globe for 37 years as a photographer for *National Geographic*.

She and a photo editor at the magazine will soon start picking out the photos for the show.

"I hope that it is something that might be able to be shown elsewhere, perhaps in Annapolis, if someone would want to hang it," she said.

The magazine's tribute talks of Mr. Abercrombie's exploits in his 39 years at the magazine. He put together 43 articles over the years from every continent and the seven seas.

Pictures included in the August issue illustrate the breadth of his travels - there are shots from the mountainous northernmost region of India, Fiji, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Spain, the former Soviet Union and the South Pole. He was the first photojournalist to fly into the pole, and was stranded for nearly three weeks after the plane went kaput.

Most remarkable were the 16 stories he did on the Middle East, including the first-ever photographs of the Hadj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. One of those photos is shown in a two-page spread in the August issue.

He was so moved after witnessing those events at Mecca that he quietly converted to Islam. But not the firebrand fundamentalism taken to terrorism, as he told *The Capital*. "Muhammad would not give those guys the time of day," he said.

The article ends with a quote from Mr. Abercrombie's unfinished memoir, part of which laments the changes in the world, especially the Middle East:

"Many of the smiles we captured are no more - bleached by tourism, stricken with war, and battered by revolution. Multi-faith Lebanon is torn by sectarian anger; ... Afghanistan bleeds from foreign invasions and its own medieval fundamentalists; Iran remains at loggerheads with the West; and Iraq lies in ashes. So in a sense my work records history as much as geography. As has been said: The past is another country."

But what a witness he was.

At a service held soon after his death, one of his Shady Side neighbors testified to that fact, saying that thanks to Mr. Abercrombie he had been able to travel the world - without ever leaving home.

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File photo by G. Nick Lundskow -- The Capital

Former *National Geographic* photographer and writer Tom Abercrombie holds a decorated scull he picked up on one of his many trips for the magazine as he stands in his West River home in 2002.