

George R. Belcher (October 21-1941-October 29, 2017)

George Belcher crossed the bar on the late afternoon of October 29 with his family at his side at the University of California, San Francisco Medical Center. Texas-tall, strapping and full of life, George had battled cancer for a decade until all options had played out. George entered this world on the banks of the Rio Grande in McAllen, Texas. It is fitting that he was born both on a border and by water, as George journeyed far in his life, crossing not only rivers but oceans. George's earliest exploration was his surrounding community in the Rio Grande Valley. The year of his birth, the new McAllen-Hidalgo-Reynosa International Bridge opened. The new span spurred the development of the region in both countries, and McAllen began to boom. George's first international travels were across that bridge. A fluent Spanish speaker, George retained a strong love of Mexico, its people and culture, and for many years specialized in the marketing and sale of Mexican art.

After graduating from the University of Texas-Pan American, in Edinburg, Texas, with the class of 1964, George joined the Peace Corps and went to Bolivia in 1964 and worked there until 1966. George then went to Vietnam with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1967. As an officer in that civilian agency dedicated to community service, George was stationed in Nha Trang on the south-central coast. Nha Trang was not close to the DMZ, but it was in an active area of Viet Cong activity, and was part of intense fighting during the Tet Offensive in 1968. George never spoke much of his service in country, but on a tour pointed out that he had worked with the local community to help preserve and restore the Cham temple of Po Nagar. The amazing fired brick towers of Po Nagar date back to before 781 AD, and George worked hard with the community to open up access to the site and stabilize the site among his other, day-to-day activities with AID. George would serve in Vietnam with USAID until 1971.

During his time in Vietnam, George's interest in history and culture took an oceanic turn when, on leave, he responded to an advertisement seeking crew for a planned reenactment of a Viking voyage that would attempt to cross the Atlantic from Limerick, Ireland and prove that those great seafarers had made voyages to America before Columbus. The voyage of the ship "Alfred the Great" ended two months later, in Gibraltar. George would often shake his head and chuckle when recounting what he always privately confided was a difficult voyage, but one that had fed his passion for the past and for adventure.

In 1976, George entered the world of art as one of the first American dealers in fine paintings specializing in the art of Mexico and Latin America. George's work as an art dealer helped satisfy his love of travel and other cultures. It also led to one of his greatest adventures. In the early 1980s, George was contacted by representatives of Agustin Acosta Lagunes, the Governor of Mexico's Veracruz Province, who was seeking to buy a painting for the Veracruz State Art Museum in Orizaba. George met with the Governor and became a friend and advisor. Acosta Lagunes, fascinated by shipwrecks, asked George to find an early shipwreck that could be excavated and displayed in the museum. That sparked a long quest in which George, with his brother Joel, would discover the lost U.S. warship *Somers*. Famous as the setting for the U.S.

Navy's only recorded mutiny, whose real-life events inspired Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, *Somers* had been lost in a squall off Veracruz during the Mexican War in 1846.

The discovery of *Somers* miles off Veracruz in 110 feet of water in 1986 led George on a quest to study and protect the wreck as an archaeological site and the grave of 32 of its crew. He lobbied the U.S. and Mexican governments, and inspired an international agreement and a joint U.S.-Mexican archaeological expedition in 1990. George and his brother Joel advised and participated in the expedition, and George personally financed the documentary film, "The Curse of the *Somers*," which repeatedly aired on the Discovery Channel for years that followed. This was the first international maritime archaeological project between the two nations, and one that reflected a painful reality of a war in which Mexico lost half of its national territory to the United States.

George's ongoing travels then saw him return to Vietnam. George had never forgotten the country, its people and his fascination with Southeast Asia's culture and art. In Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), he met fellow art dealer Nyugen Thi Lan Huong. Their professional partnership blossomed into marriage, a first for both of them, and for George, a new venture in his sixth decade of life. One of their major collaborations was a retrospective of Vietnamese artist le Pho, a post-impressionist master artist. They also became the proud parents of Lily Edith Belcher. Dividing time between their homes in San Francisco and Saigon, George focused on not only art. He personally began a collection of tribal and pre-Columbian art that focused on sharks. He established the Asia Maritime Society to support the development of scientific maritime archaeology in Vietnam. He joined the board of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, the world's leading scientific institute focused on shipwrecks. He authored articles on indigenous Southeast Asian watercraft and art, and planned a yet-to-realized sailing re-creation of the voyage of *Moby Dick*'s Pequod. That project saw him journey to as many Herman Melville sites that he could reach. The man's intellectual curiosity was limitless.

Diving, and fishing remained great passions, as well as travel. Full of enthusiasm and good humor, George once demonstrated the art of eating *pidan*, or 100-year eggs, an Asian delicacy made by preserving, in this case, in salty ashes, to a small group of friends and one nearby intoxicated group of young French men as we all sat at a riverside café in Hoian, Vietnam. For those unfamiliar with the delicacy, the best eggs are those which were fertilized and hence have not a yolk but an embryo. George swallowed his whole. Inspired by the feat, one of the Frenchmen bought one and made the mistake of biting it in half. He barely made it to the river bank. George just smiled.

Despite the cancer diagnosis, which George took in stride and through which he endured a variety of treatments, he continued to embrace life and adventure. It was also clear that he was buoyed by his love of Lan Huong and Lily. You never saw a prouder husband or father. Travels between Vietnam and San Francisco continued, as did his last passion for Patagonia and the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas). He co-led a National Geographic Society expedition to document the 19th century wreck of the barque *Vicar of Bray* at Goose Green, in the islands, in February of this year, and then embarked, solo, on an extensive tour of Patagonia to retrace the

steps of Bruce Chatwin. He completed his manuscript on October 9, just shy of three weeks before he died.

I had the privilege of being George's friend for thirty years. As the oldest of three boys, I never thought I'd be the recipient of George's greatest gift to me. He became the big brother I never had. We met when he invited me, at the suggestion of friend Mitchell Marken, to dive on the wreck they "suspected" (but knew) to be *Somers*, but wanted an outside opinion. Since then, we traveled, sometimes only with George, but also with Lan Huong and my wife Ann to Hong Kong, Vietnam, and to the Falklands, as well as sharing many visits and dinners, including street side repasts in the alleys of Hong Kong and Saigon and the famous duck's egg episode in Hoian. Books would appear in the mail on subjects we both loved, courtesy of George, who knew I'd love them. We stayed in regular touch via phone and email, and our last communication, just before he died, was one in which he confessed that he thought his time was coming to an end. But he remained optimistic that the new medicine would work. He had so much more to explore and to do. Ever the poet, he said that like Billy Budd, as Melville recounts in the poem "Billy in the Darbies," at the end of *Billy Budd* that he'd soon be sleeping amongst the oozy weeds. I know better. He's with his ancestors now, and he's in rapt conversation with the crew of the *Somers* in between chats with Le Pho, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Jose Maria Velasco and others in heaven. God speed, my friend and brother.

- James Delgado