

# The Voyager

by MADELEINE GORDON



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Carolyn “Lonnie” Schorer (M.Arch. ’86) has jumped out of planes, worked the Olympic Games, completed six marathons since age 50, and dined with Eleanor Roosevelt. She calls Buzz Aldrin a friend and will soon search for a sunken aircraft carrier under the Pacific Ocean.

The 73-year-old has lived around the world—in Thailand, Turkey, Italy, Norway, the former Soviet Union, and Blacksburg, where she pursued a master’s degree in architecture—all while raising three children with her husband, David.

Living abroad for a total of 22 years as part of David’s career with the U.S. Department of State, Schorer learned more than five languages, including Russian, Turkish, Italian, Thai, and Norwegian, while engaged in efforts such as UNESCO World Heritage programs.

And then there are the experiences she can’t discuss, such as her early career with the CIA.

After Schorer watched on television as President John F. Kennedy briefed the nation on the Cuban missile crisis, the patriotic Connecticut College student switched her major from French to Russian. For the sake of appearances, Schorer searched for jobs before graduation—even though, by her junior year, a CIA position was already waiting for her.

As their careers progressed side by side, the Schorers found it challenging to raise their family with a sense of normalcy and balance amid extremism, military coups, and cultural biases and terrorist threats against Americans. “We made sure to not transmit any sense of danger to the kids, and we made sure every place we lived felt like home. We always lived in the neighborhood, not in an embassy complex,” said Schorer, who is now retired from the CIA.

While this lifestyle wouldn’t suit everyone, Schorer has never turned down an opportunity for learning and discovery.

“There is a quote about a mind that is stretched never going back to its original dimension,” she said. “So as you stretch your capabilities and your mind, of course everything expands. The network of people you meet, the skills you have, and the knowledge you have all just grow and grow. You can’t know that if you say no. Humanity is naturally curious, seeking to know and understand. Perhaps I am just willing to be swept along in the wave.”

## Taking flight

As an adventurous toddler, Schorer once ran off with the family dog. In her childhood, she would often ask her father to take her to the airport to watch planes take off and land. As she grew older, she ventured off to be an American Field Service high school student in Istanbul and later joined the St. Michael’s Angels Skydiving Club.

Schorer’s family was populated with builders on her father’s side and artists and sculptors on her mother’s side. When she sensed that the doors for women in architecture were beginning to open, she stepped through. “With architecture as the blending of construction and art, I had grown up with appreciation for both disciplines and was just waiting” for an opportunity, she said. “The privilege of walking through the doors in Cowgill Hall as a grad student in 1981 was a special gift.”

Degree in hand, Schorer first worked for an Italian architect, documenting and drawing an entire medieval hilltown north of Rome. It was a “total immersion” project, she said, much like her government role. Later, in Norway, the architect was involved with housing and historic projects. In recent years, Schorer has worked with architectural firms in the Washington, D.C., area.

One of Schorer’s role models is Amelia Earhart, who disappeared in 1937 while

attempting to become the first female to complete an around-the-world flight.

“She encouraged women to not be afraid to try. Teachers say that students today, especially girls, have low self-esteem and are risk-averse,” said Schorer, who holds Air Single Engine Land and Air Single Engine Sea piloting licenses. “Amelia demonstrated many firsts.”

Schorer eagerly accepted the chance to test the theory that Earhart had landed and eventually died on Nikumaroro, an island in the western Pacific Ocean. In 1997, 2007, and 2010, she traveled to the island as a member of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) team.

“It’s fascinating to be part of history by participating in the present,” said Schorer, who learned the importance of preserving culture from her uncle, Deane Keller, one of the World War II Monuments Men featured in Robert Edsel’s book “Saving Italy.” (Edsel also wrote “Monuments Men,” the book on similar events in Europe that was made into a recent movie by the same name.)

## Zest for life

Through TIGHAR, Schorer was asked to work with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Office of National Marine Sanctuaries as an archival researcher with NOAA’s Maritime Heritage program.

In one project, she was tasked with locating three U.S. Navy ships lost during the Battle of the Coral Sea in World War II in May 1942. The battle, which pitted the Japanese naval and aerial forces against those of the U.S., was the first between aircraft carriers.



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**Globetrotter:** Employing kite aerial photography on Nikumaroro, an island in the western Pacific Ocean, Lonnie Schorer ’86 (left) helped to search for Amelia Earhart’s resting place. She was also the senior vice president for design and construction for decks 5-12 of *The World at ResidenSea* (above), the world’s first private residential community at sea.

Sequestered in the U.S. National Archives and the Washington Navy Yard, Schorer spent five months reconstructing the battle and identifying all the ships involved. Following a detailed search of deck logs, action reports, and images, she was able to triangulate the positions of the aircraft carrier *USS Lexington*, the battleship *USS Sims*, and an oiler, *Neosho*. As a result of her findings, Australia declared that region of the Pacific Ocean a historic area.

During her search, Schorer discovered a note from a U.S. Navy pilot that read, "Scratch one flattop." He had just sunk a Japanese carrier. Said Schorer, "In disbelief, I was holding the original note in my hands—an unsurpassed academic exploration, experienced sitting quietly alone in the archives."

Moments like these keep Schorer motivated.

"It shows how we're tied to the future and tied to the past. I've learned so much history, and it has had such an impact on me to be connected to these historic events and to bring them back to the present," Schorer said. "To be in the mix of it all is very exciting and stimulating—to think that the piece of paper you are holding can bring the battle back. All of the torpedoes, the fires and the yelling and the chaos, it all recreates in your mind when you're connected by participating in history in the present."

In 2015, Schorer and a team will travel to the Coral Sea to try to locate the ships. She will serve as the battle historian and the co-identifier of forensic aircraft parts.

Another NOAA project involves the *USS Macon*, a dirigible aircraft carrier that crashed into the sea off Point Sur,

California, in 1935, with four F9C Sparrowhawks on board. In early 2015, she will serve as an aquanaut and help crew a submersible that will map the site, more than a thousand feet underwater, in three-dimensional detail.

**The greatest risk**

Schorer is quite comfortable at sea. She served as the senior vice president of design and construction for decks 5-12 of *The World of ResidenSea*, the first-ever private residential community at sea, living in Oslo, Norway, and on the luxury ship under construction in Rissa, Norway, from 1997 to 2002.

"I believe that *The World* is a prototype for learning to live in new environments, at sea or in space," said Schorer, who was drawn to the project for its impact on the future of exploration. "Those going to live on the moon will have to rely on themselves. Those who have the courage and vision to be the first on one frontier will also be among the first on the next frontier."

Members of the space community, including Buzz Aldrin, took note of the innovative strides of *The World*, believing that the future of space travel, with its demands for self-sustained, long-term transportation, might be modeled on the cruise ship industry. Aldrin enlisted Schorer's expertise to encourage space exploration. Together, they founded a company called Global Space Travelers to promote the idea of private citizens in space.

"One of our missions was an outreach to children in schools," Schorer said. "I found that kids give up on their dreams as early as fifth grade, and so we came up with a project to engage their interest and involve them in their own futures."

Schorer authored a series of children's books entitled "Kids to Space." She hopes to inspire children, like her own four grandsons, to test the boundaries and think about their future in space.

"Pushing to frontiers is the essence of greater knowledge and survival," said Schorer, who returned this summer from a cattle drive in Wyoming. "Otherwise, we will stall in complacency and not advance as a civilization. Failing to risk, explore, and discover is the greatest risk of all."

Schorer's zest for life motivates those around her.

"In the 20 years that I've known Lonnie, there is no one that I have met that I would consider a mentor in my life (other than Lonnie) as far as the way she carries herself and her innate desire for excellence,"

said Holly Abernathy, who worked with Schorer during the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. "She definitely has this sort of character and spirit in her that brings out the best in others."

For the '96 games, Schorer was the director of national Olympic committee services for the canoe/kayak slalom village on Tennessee's Ocoee River, where she was responsible for the participating countries' teams. Prior to that, she staffed several committees for the Olympics and Paralympics in Atlanta and in Lillehammer, Norway, for the 1994 winter games.

Schorer's younger brother, Russ Jones, said his sister has an extraordinary mix of characteristics and experiences. "She has lived several lifetimes all packed into one, and she continues to do it. She is now

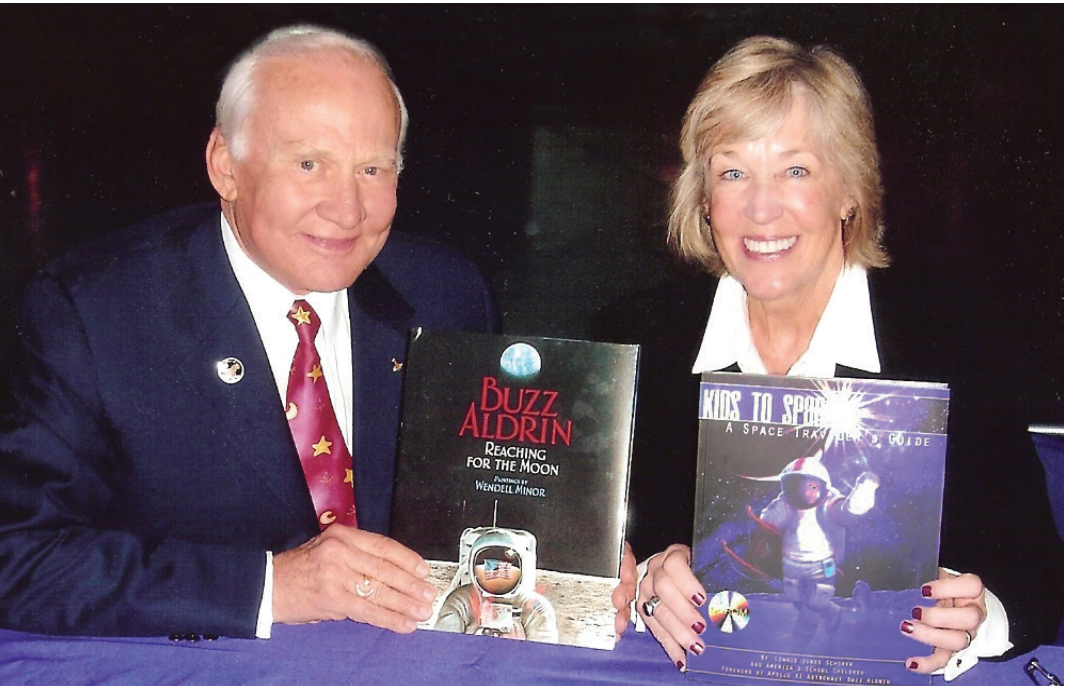
**Adventures:**  
Q: What else will you explore?  
A: "Who knows? That's the beauty and wonder of it all!"  
Read more of Schorer's inspired worldview in the Q-and-A at [www.vtmag.vt.edu](http://www.vtmag.vt.edu).

in her seventies, and she is not showing any signs of slowing down or being less interested. She takes on new things all the time," Jones said.

Enjoying life between Virginia and New Hampshire, Schorer has no plans to resign to a quieter life.

"I know that when things become too still, quiet, and comfortable, that's the very moment that I take on a new challenge." □

*Madeleine Gordon, a senior majoring in English and communication, was a Virginia Tech Magazine intern.*



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**Final frontier:** Lonnie Schorer's design work for a luxury residential ship caught the attention of astronauts like the famed Buzz Aldrin (at left), who told her, "You're encapsulating people's environments in steel. We're doing the same in space, but you're ahead of us in designing for what the private sector will expect, versus what NASA and the military get," said Schorer. The two friends formed a company to promote the idea of private citizens in space.



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