



Beck eyes the vista and sketches at Mbal Lake, Kenya, in April.

# Off to Africa

Retiree pursues 'seize the day' adventure // By Chip Beck

I believe retirement is not about winding down or dying in place; it is an opportunity to explore new vistas, seize life anew and squeeze every ounce of adventure out of the future. Only this time, you decide the terms, itinerary and schedules, not some bureaucratic cog.

If you are the type of retiree who is tempted to sit in the proverbial rocking chair on the front porch, I suggest you arise before dawn, boil a cup of Rwandan java and watch the sun climb over the horizon. Then launch off your duff and follow that sun tracking across some exotic landscape. If you are still roaming after nightfall, scan the heavens

and contemplate the riddles of existence while soaking in the beauty of the moment. Live every day as though it may be your last—one day, it surely will be.

For now, I'm taking my own advice—in Africa—as I follow my lifelong passions for art and adventure. Later this year, my wife will retire and follow suit with her own twists.

## New Retiree

After five years of directing the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program, I retired from the Department of State on New Year's Day. The very next day, I packed for a post-retirement

stint as security division director with the Nairobi-based organization Africa Expeditions. For a year, perhaps longer, I will kick around less-traveled parts of Africa, helping to provide nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, contractors, peacekeepers, governments, oil and mining companies, and others with "life support systems" in remote areas of southern Sudan, the Congo River basin, the Nuba Mountains, Darfur, the Rift Valley, the Horn of Africa's deserts, West Africa's tropical forests and other distant horizons.

Along the way, under decidedly genteel conditions, I have sampled

fine Cape wines, dined elegantly in several countries and punched hearty drives along Africa's many golf links while walking the courses—no carts for this retiree.

Africa's beauty, geography, people, wildlife, flora, cultures and historical sites are too compelling for me not to photograph, write about or (my preference) record on paper and canvas as field sketches and paintings. Department veterans may remember me as the creator of "Supercrat, The Super Bureaucrat" (1979–1993), *State Magazine's* first serialized comic strip, which tweaked the Foreign Service and not-always-so-Civil Service. More info on my work is at [www.combatartist.com](http://www.combatartist.com).



**Above:** Beck's 2005 sketch of Sudan People's Liberation Army leader John Garang, signed by Garang two months before his death. **Below:** A Beck painting of African peacekeeping troops on maneuvers. **Bottom right:** Beck sketching in Edinburgh, Scotland.



## Combat Artist

What many don't know is that I was the Navy's official combat artist for Operation Desert Storm. A combat artist witnesses and records history from direct experience, whereas a military illustrator uses reference materials and recollections of others to depict historical events. *Soldier of Fortune* magazine in 1999 called me America's only genuine "Cold War combat artist."

I've also used my artistic talents to depict some 20 wars,

revolutions, coups, conflicts and other forms of chaos from Indochina in the 1960s through 21st-century conflicts in Iraq and Darfur.

Since I was four years old, I could draw well. Almost as early, I was captivated by stories, biographies, films and tall tales of soldiers, sailors, explorers and other rascals who ventured to earth's remote way stations. My dream was to follow in their footsteps and see the world.

dense woods near my Maryland home to alligator-laden canals skirting my cousins' home in rural Florida to the mountains, deserts and coasts of California, where I moved at age 13. A decade later, my travels took me to the battlegrounds of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. More places in turmoil followed Angola, Western Sahara, Sudan, Chad, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Beirut, Panama (Operation Just Cause), Colombia, Kuwait, Iraq and, since 2005, many festering conflicts in Africa. In retirement, the adventures continue.

While searching out new vistas and quests until that fateful last day on earth arrives, I dream of writing about and painting the people, places and amazing events I have witnessed in life's journey so far.

## Field Work

Then the idea hit me: Why not write and paint in the so-called "field," from where those stories originated? That's what I'm now doing. I began writing this article while sitting next to the Nile River town of Juba, Sudan, and completed it in a vine-covered cottage within striking distance of the 11th hole of Nairobi's Karen Country Club.

Neither spot is a bad place for an active, adventurous retiree. ■

*The author is director of the security division of Africa Expeditions.*

Over the course of six decades, I turned that long-distant dream into reality. I have lived in, worked in or traveled to some 109 countries on six continents. (Antarctica has eluded me.) En route, I encountered heroes, villains, historic figures of questionable merit and ordinary people of extraordinary character. I saw life at its finest and death at its ugliest.

Initially, my childhood adventures took me from the

