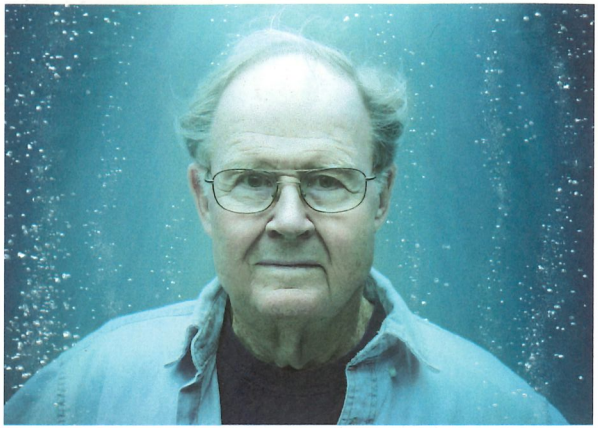

George Bass

1932–

He opened up the oceans to the scrutiny of science

An archaeological expedition is complicated under the best of circumstances. Now try moving the whole operation underwater. Nearly three quarters of the earth's surface is covered with water, and human beings have sailed—and lost—ships along every latitude of the seas. But it wasn't until archaeologist George Bass came along that science developed the tools to explore the remains of that great lost fleet in a systematic way.

As of 2014, Bass is a professor emeritus at Texas A&M University. But in 1960, when he was only 28 and pursuing his Ph.D. in archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania, he was tapped to lead the investigation of the ancient Bronze Age ship *Cape Gelidonya*, which rested under 90 feet of water off the coast of Turkey. His first order of business was to learn to dive, a skill he acquired thanks to a few lessons at a YMCA. That done, he attacked the first such complete underwater investigation of its kind with both energy and imagination—and in the process launched an entirely new branch of archaeology. He also developed a whole new suite of techniques and a whole new inventory of hardware to aid his search: an underwater decompression chamber, new methods of stereoscopic photography, a tiny two-person submersible.

Bass's most celebrated discovery came in 1984, in Uluburun, Turkey, when he discovered a ship that foundered 3,300 years ago, carrying ivory, ebony logs and more. The discovery, a treasure in itself, also helped support existing theories of Near East trade routes during the Bronze Age.

Bass remained in the Mediterranean region for years after that, leading explorations along the coasts of Turkey, Italy and Greece. In 1973 he formalized the field with the founding of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, turning over its directorship only in 2000. There has never been a time that ships weren't lost at sea, but it's only recently that their stories need not vanish along with them.