

Legacy: André Galerne, 1926-2008

An adventurer's approach to life and work.

By Leigh Buchanan



When André Galerne was a boy, he loved to explore caves along the French coastline, descending to the shores of deep underground lakes. As he gazed into the dark, silent water, a lifelong fascination with diving was born. Galerne went on to found International Underwater Contractors, once among the world's largest deep-sea construction companies, and to invent diving technologies that transformed the industry. He died on May 6 at 81.

Galerie's early life has the shape of a boy's adventure story. Born in Paris in 1926, he joined the French Resistance at 16. After the liberation of Paris, Galerie earned an engineering degree, but the sea still beckoned. In 1951, he introduced himself to Jacques Cousteau; Galerie sailed for a year on the *Calypso* and learned scuba. "Cousteau was interested in filmmaking and exploring," says Lionel Galerie, who became CEO of IUC in 1996. "My father wanted to make a living out of it."

In 1952, Galerie and some former comrades in arms formed Sogetram, one of the first commercial diving firms. The company fixed bridges and performed other civil-engineering projects, but Galerie chafed under government regulation. He sold his interest and immigrated to Canada, where he formed IUC. In 1962, he moved the business to New York City. From there, IUC handled local construction projects -- for example, inspecting the bedrock on the site of the World Trade Center -- and launched into the global oil industry. IUC divers serviced drilling platforms from California to Angola.

As he aged, Galerne stopped diving, but he never stopped inventing. His most important innovation was a portable pressurized chamber. Concerned that injured divers could not be moved to hospitals until they spent hours or days in a decompression chamber, Galerne designed a chamber that could be lifted by helicopter -- in many cases, to the hyperbaric medical facility he helped establish in Aberdeen, Scotland. "When they got there, medics could go into the chamber and do whatever it took to save the diver's life," says Lionel Galerne. "Before that, he would have had to suffer through decompression and hope he got out in time to make it to a hospital."

Galerie saved other lives as well. One evening at a party in Manhattan, he met a fire chief who was distraught because one of his men had been hospitalized with carbon monoxide poisoning. Galerie had purchased two decompression chambers for training divers; he suggested that placing the firefighter in one of them might force out the carbon monoxide. "They brought him in on a gurney," says Lionel Galerie. "He was under pressure with pure oxygen for half an hour, and he walked out. For the next five years, we became the 911 emergency call center for carbon monoxide poisoning in New York City."

Brusque, brave, and brilliant, Galerie over the years became an icon to ambitious young divers, says Bill Crowley, who worked for IUC in the '70s and '80s. "Back then," says Crowley, "there were three places you went if you wanted to dive deep. The North Sea. The Gulf of Mexico. And IUC. IUC was André."

Published on: Aug 1, 2008



Photo: Angoisse, 1ère version. André Galerie et son équipe prêts au voyage en juin 1949. Collection Antonio Castro.

Andre Galerne 1926 – 2008 in Memoriam

Born in 1926, in Paris, France, Andre was recruited into the French underground while the German forces occupied France during World War II, and later attended l' Ecole Technique d'Aeronautique et de Construction Automobile. In 1952, he founded SOGETRAM, Society General de Travaux Marine et Fluviaux one of the world's first international firms of professional diving in industrial work. Using the Aqua Lung (SCUBA), and light diving helmets, this firm revolutionized the underwater industry. In 1959, Andre left France to start IUC (International Underwater Contractors) Canada in Montreal, and in 1962, immigrated to the United States where he formed International Underwater Contractors, Inc., serving as President until 1993. In 1970, he began IUC International to service the off shore oil industry and in 1978, Deep Sea International to operate marine vessels, submersibles, and ROV's for the same industry. Andre is credited with starting several professional diving schools, several hyperbaric treatment facilities and holds four U.S. Patents on methodology and equipment advances in the industry. He holds Honors with appointments as Knight of the "French Legion de Honor" for his service in WWII and belongs to the following organizations; ADCI (Former President), Marine Technology Society (Former Vice-President), The Moles, National Ocean Industries Association (Former Director), Undersea Medical and Hyperbaric Society, Naval Submarine League, and others. Andre Galerne is the recipient of 13th Annual Lockheed Award (1981), Special Commendation for Improvement of Safety and Training Practices from the Diving Industry by NOIA (1983), Lowell Thomas Explorer's Club Award (1986), New York Academy of Science Sea Award for achievement in Science and Technology (1989), The NOGI Award by the Underwater Society of America (1988), in 1995 the Association of Diving Contractors modified their rules, for one time only, to award to a Board Member the John Galletti Memorial Award and as such is now a member of the Association of Diving Contractors International Hall of Fame. Andre was involved at the very inception of this organization and held the position of President of the ADCI Board of Directors of in 1989 and 1990. His passing leaves a void in the Commercial Diving Industry. He will be missed.

