

# GEORGE, a Burmese python



**G**eorge was a Burmese python who was rescued by a U.S. Army soldier during the Vietnam War. The 16-foot snake delighted and awed visitors to the Museum for 25 years, from 1964 to 1989. George's remains are now in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

This narrative is based on original documents and photographs in the archives of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

Text by Margaret Cotrufo, Assistant Librarian, 2007.

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Updated October 2013.



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The digitization of the images in this document were made possible by a grant from LSTA. The grant was administrated by NCECHO, a division of the N. C. Dept of Cultural Resources.





In 1963, during the Vietnam War, Master Sgt. Dewey Simpson commanded a Special Forces unit that included Cambodian civilians of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group. One day Simpson and his men left their heavily reinforced camp near Chau Lang to patrol the surrounding territory. After several days on patrol the men returned to camp with a different type of prisoner—a live 9-foot Burmese python, tied to a bamboo pole for easy carrying. The men,

mostly Cambodians, were envisioning a festive meal with snake as the main course. But Sgt. Simpson, who was not used to thinking of a snake as food, decided to rescue the snake from its fate on the dinner table. The camp bugler made a handsome cage out of teakwood for the snake. Simpson's buddy, Chester Townsend, named the snake George.

George quickly became a star attraction especially with visiting American soldiers from Saigon. George was now safe from the dinner table but just as vulnerable as anyone else when the Vietcong attacked the camp early one morning. Luck was on the side of the Vietcong when their guns hit a truckload of artillery ammunition left in the open. When the artillery exploded shrapnel flew everywhere killing several men and wounding George. A medic bandaged George who recovered with only a scar.

When Simpson received orders to return to the US, he knew he could not leave George behind to become a tasty meal for the Cambodians. The solution came from a visiting General who suggested that George could be useful as a training aid back at Fort Bragg. After verifying there were no laws against importation of reptiles to the U. S, Simpson and George headed for Can Tho. Here they faced the first of several obstacles on their

journey home. The Can Tho pilot who would take them to Saigon was not happy about having a live snake on his plane. A little persuasion from Simpson in the form of a “gift” of a Thompson submachine gun and they were on their way. In Saigon, soldiers were waiting at the landing strip with a truck to confiscate George. The soldiers wanted the snake as an attraction for their camp. They argued that “household pets” were not allowed on military transports. Simpson explained that George was a training aid and therefore did not qualify as military cargo. The soldiers relented and Simpson and his “military cargo” boarded the flight to the U.S. Things went smoothly until a stopover in Hawaii. A customs agent, assuming George was stuffed, wanted to examine the type of straw used. The agent opened the box, saw a live snake, and quickly shut it. Hawaii was a snake-free state and it would remain so. Simpson and George continued their journey problem-free until they arrived at Fort Bragg in North Carolina.

Simpson was not keen on giving the snake over to the people who kept the camp “training aids”. He thought they wouldn’t take proper care of George. Taking the snake home was not an option; Simpson had a small dog that would be a tasty tidbit for George. Simpson improvised by placing George in the barracks showers.

Eventually the inconvenience for the soldiers of not having access to first floor showers and the difficulty of finding live food for George meant George needed a new home. After contacting zoos with no luck, Simpson asked the City of Raleigh to accept the snake. They agreed to take him as the first resident of a future zoological park. His temporary home would be the State Museum in Raleigh.

It was a chilly February day when Simpson placed George on the back seat of his car and headed north for the hour trip to Raleigh. Although Simpson was careful to warm the car up, George soon moved from the back seat to under the front seat where it was warmer. In Raleigh, Curator William Palmer of the North Carolina State Museum helped coax the 10-ft snake from around the seat coils. George was then placed in a cage in his new home.

George grew in size and popularity over the next decade. Simpson continued his military career, occasionally checking on George by phone or making visits. In 1977, the Museum staff built a bigger cage for George who had grown to 15 feet long. The six-sided glass-enclosed cage was outfitted with radiant heat in the floor and full spectrum lighting



in the ceiling. George had a small pool of water and a tree to climb. Visitors, especially schoolchildren, enjoyed watching George move and climb his tree.

In his old age, George developed glandular cancer in his lower jaw and had difficulty eating. Veterinarians successfully removed the diseased tissue in George's upper jaw, but later the malignancy appeared in the lower jaw. George had adenocarcinoma and could no longer eat. On April 26, 1989, George was transferred to the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian). There they preserved his skeleton in the museum's research collections and sent samples of his diseased tissue to the Cancer Bank.

During his life, George was a Museum celebrity. He received letters from schoolchildren, his image was on clothing and postcards, and his life-story was commemorated in a book. Visitors continue to ask about him long after his death.



## Entrance to Special Forces camp near Chau Lang

SFC Haire, SSG Cardell, and MSG Simpson stand in front  
of the only gate to the camp.

Creator: Unknown

Date created: 1963

Location: near Chau Lang, An Giang Province, Vietnam

Format: photographic print

Identifier:

Rights Usage: Restricted use

Copyright: Dewey C. Simpson





View from the camp near  
Chau Lang

Nui Gai, one of the Seven Mountains of the Mekong  
Delta, rises behind Camp Chau Lang.

Creator: Unknown

Date created: 1963

Location: near Chau Lang, An Giang Province, Vietnam

Format: photographic print

Identifier:

Rights Usage: Restricted use

Copyright: Dewey C. Simpson



## Sergeant Dewey Simpson holds George

MSG Dewey Simpson (fore) and SFC B. Persamperia hold  
the 10-foot 9-inch python they named George.

Creator: Unknown

Date created: 1963

Location: near Chau Lang, An Gang Province, Vietnam

Format: photographic print

Identifier:

Rights Usage: Restricted use

Copyright: Dewey C. Simpson





### Burmese python named George

George in his first cage at the North Carolina State Museum. He arrived at the Museum in February 1964.

Creator: Unknown

Date created: approximately Feb 1964

Location: Raleigh, N. C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George06-first cage.tif

Rights Usage: Restricted use

Copyright: Property of NC Museum of Natural Sciences



George grows to 15 feet

Creator: Unknown

Date created:

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George09-portrait.tif

Rights Usage:

Copyright: Property of NC Museum of Natural Sciences





## The Framework for George's new cage

David Carroll, carpenter, and William Palmer, herpetologist,  
work on George's new six-sided cage.

Creator: Unknown

Date created: 1977

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George11-cage-construction.tif

Rights Usage:

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## Finishing the floor

A worker puts the finishing touches on George's new cage. The cage had radiant heating in the floor, full spectrum lighting, a small pool for bathing and drinking, and a tree trunk for climbing.

Creator: Unknown

Date created: 1977 or 1978

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George05-cage-construction.tif

Rights Usage:

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## Ceremony to install George in his new cage

Curator Bill Palmer, Agriculture Commissioner James A. Graham, and CSM Dewey Simpson move George into his new cage following a ribbon-cutting ceremony on June 14, 1978. Peter Domville, in the background, designed the new snake habitat.

Creator: Danny Lyons

Date created: June 14, 1978

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George14-new-cage-ceremony.tif

Rights Usage:

Copyright: Property of NC Museum of Natural Sciences



**Sergeant Dewey Simpson  
speaks to visitors**

Creator: Unknown

Date created:

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

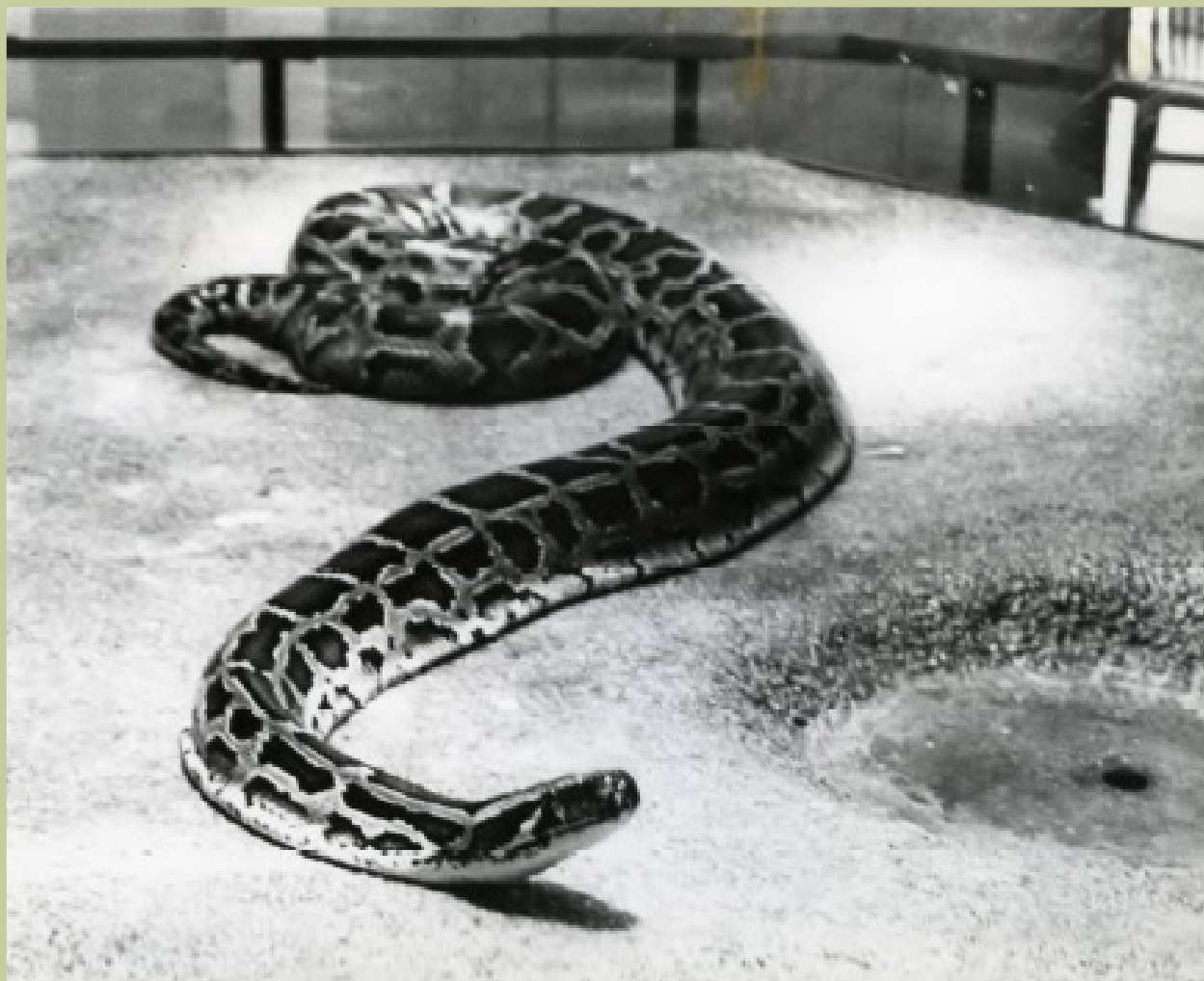
Format: photographic print

Identifier: George12-Simpson-speaks.tif

Rights Usage:

Copyright: Property of NC Museum of Natural Sciences





George enjoys his  
new cage

Creator: Unknown

Date created: 1978

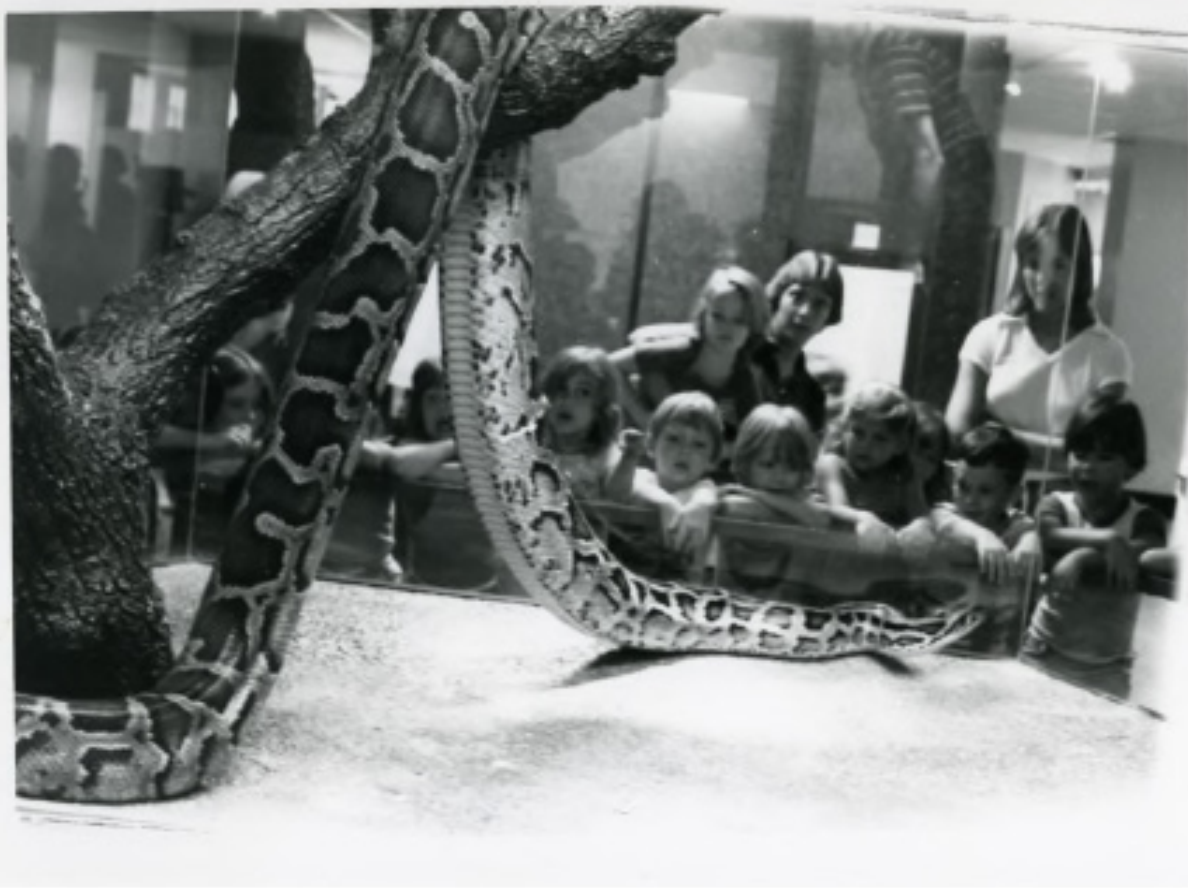
Location: Raleigh, N.C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George23-in new cage.tif

Rights Usage:

Copyright: Property of NC Museum of Natural Sciences



## School children watch George climb his tree

Pythons are nocturnal therefore few museum visitors have a chance to see them move. If George was active in the daytime, it meant he was probably hungry.

Creator: Unknown

Date created:

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George18-ClimbsTree.jpg

Rights Usage:

Copyright: Property of NC Museum of Natural Sciences





## Valentines for George

George was the most popular exhibit at the museum among schoolchildren.

Creator: Unknown

Date created:

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George27-valentines.tif

Rights Usage:

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## Alvin Braswell cleaning George's cage

Unlike many Burmese pythons, George was mild mannered and relatively easy to handle. Here, Curator Alvin Braswell moves George out of the way to clean his cage. The quilt (in the background) will be put over the snake to indicate it is not feeding time.

Creator: Unknown

Date created:

Location: Raleigh, N.C.

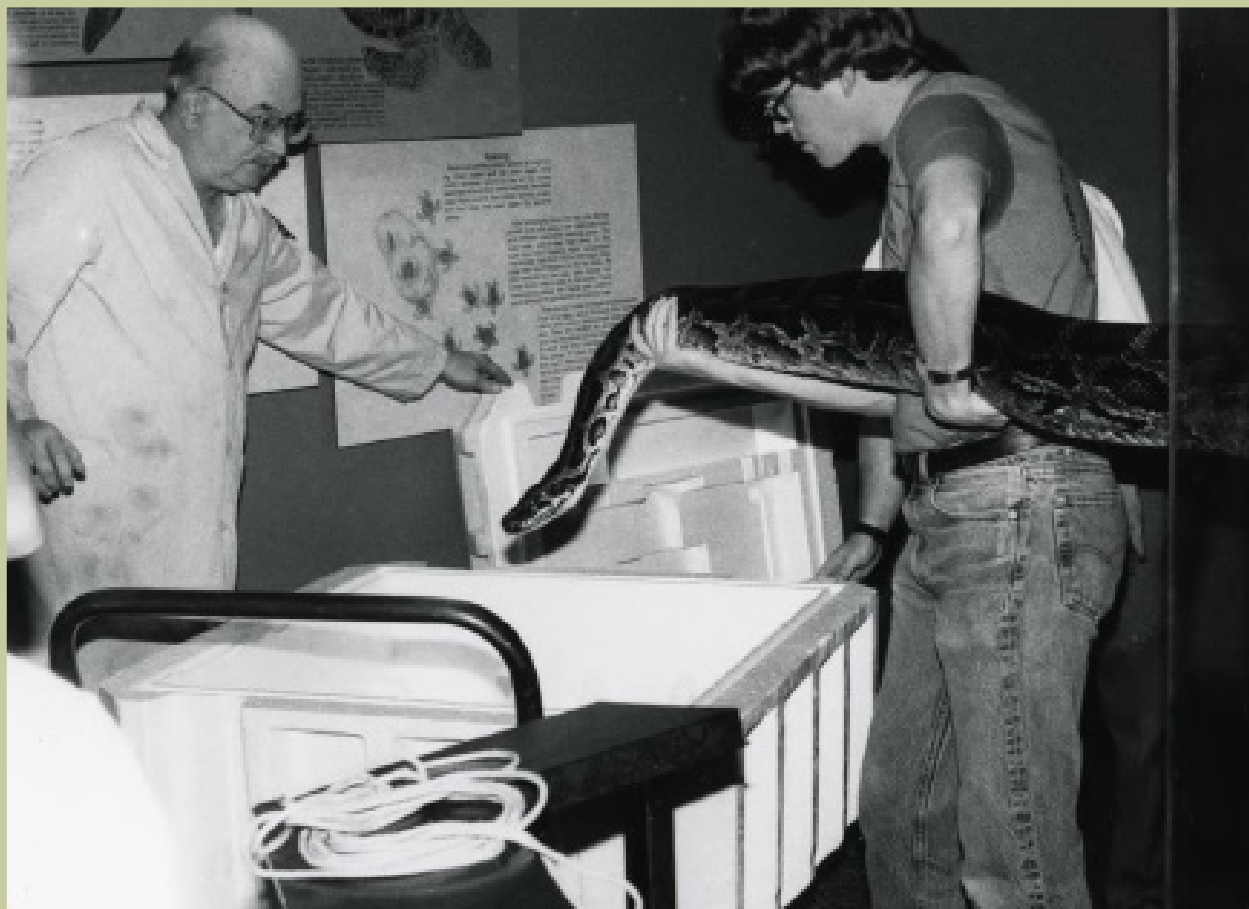
Format: photographic print

Identifier: George21-AlvinAndQuilt.tif

Rights Usage:

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## George goes to the Smithsonian

Jeff Beane moves George into a traveling container as curator William Palmer looks on. George, incurably ill with cancer, will go to the Smithsonian where his remains will be valuable to science and medicine.

Creator: Danny Lyons

Date created: 1989

Location: North Carolina State Museum

Format: photographic print

Identifier: George30-to-Smithsonian.tif

Rights Usage:

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## RESOURCES ON GEORGE AND BURMESE PYTHONS

The original letters and documents pertaining to George are available to interested persons by appointment (Librarian, Janet Edgerton 919-707-9810 or Assistant Librarian Margaret Cotrufo 919-707-9831)

### Web pages:

**Explorations: The Vietnam War as History** on web site *Digital History*.

[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning\\_history/vietnam/vietnam\\_menu.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/vietnam/vietnam_menu.cfm).

**Vietnam War** by Jennifer Rosenberg on web site *About.com 20th Century History*.

<http://history1900s.about.com/od/vietnamwar/a/vietnamwar.htm>

**American Experience: Vietnam Online** on web site *UNC TV*.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/>

**Burmese Python, *Python molurus bivittatus*** on web site *National Geographic*.

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/reptiles/burmese-python/>

**Burmese Python** on web site *WhoZoo* (Fort Worth Zoo)

<http://whozoo.org/students/stamoo/pythonhtml.html>

### Books:

**A Snake Called George** by Mary Ann Brittain. Raleigh: NC State Museum of Natural Sciences, 1987.

**Asian Rock Pythons** (juvenile literature) by Valerie Weber. Introduces the physical characteristics and behavior of the large pythons found in India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Gareth Stevens Pub, 2003. (ISBN: 0836836553)

**The Giant Snakes**; the natural history of the boa constrictor, the anaconda, and the largest pythons, including comparative facts about other snakes and basic information on reptiles in general by Clifford Hillhouse Pope. New York, Knopf, 1961

**Boas and Pythons of the World** by Mark O'Shea. Princeton, NJ, 2007.