

ADVENTURES FOR "LIFE"

George Silk Can Stand Six Years More



At five o'clock the other morning, a telephone rang in room 409 of the Waterloo Hotel in Wellington, and a very sleepy New Zealander rolled over and answered it. The voice at the other end was speaking from New York, and the New Zealander was George Silk (above), now one of the team of 24 photographers who are scattered about the globe taking pictures for "Life." He had forgotten that he might have expected a phone call in reply to the cable he had sent off the night before, in between drinks. Later that morning, he was telling "The Listener" about it. "So I had to pull myself together and make bright conversation," he said. "We talked for about five minutes and I told them how I was getting on. In the end they said, 'Well, we'll expect to hear from you in China in about a week's time.' That was all."

Silk has been in New Zealand since the beginning of the year, doing a story at *Life's* request on the practical results of our social legislation, the medical side of Social Security, organisation of Unions, agriculture, the Maoris—a general look at the country, in fact. *Life* wanted it because of "the interest in New Zealand that was awakened by Peter Fraser at UNO." Immediately before he came here he was interviewing and photographing the major Japanese war criminals in Japan. He was due to leave again for China a few days after we saw him.

Silk left New Zealand soon after the war began and persuaded the Australian Government to make him an official War Photographer (*Listener*, June 12, 1942). Before then, he had been in a camera shop in Auckland, devoting his spare time to photography. For the Australian Department of Information he went to the Middle East, then he covered the war in New Guinea, was in the Gona-Buna campaign, the most desperate stage of the fighting there, and went on "a little 750-mile hike" with the Australians. After that he joined *Life's* team of war photographers.

He went to Italy, Cassino, Anzio, the fall of Rome. Then he went with the airborne troops into Southern France.

Sole Survivor

"Had a pretty bad crack-up there. Going in with a glider and the glider cracked up on anti-glider obstacles. There were nine of us in it. Eight were killed."

Silk said nothing about being the only survivor. He waited for me to work that out. He sat with one foot across the other knee, pulling at his sock with his hand, and spoke with occasional traces of an American accent, but never noisily.

"I had several ribs bust up. I went back to New York to convalesce for a couple of months; then I joined the British Second Army in Holland, in the floods, the canals, and so on. Then to the Ardennes. Got wounded twice—a bit of shrapnel when I was crossing the Roer river, and then at Cologne I had to pull right out, and got back to the States about VE Day. After that I came across to do the Pacific. I was the first in at Hiroshima. Went there in a U.S. Navy flying-boat. It was a jacked-up deal.

"Pretty eerie and grim going in at first. I went without any idea of what the reaction of the people there was going to be.

"This was immediately after the surrender?"

"Two days before the actual signing. I thought the people might be pretty mad, thought they might go us. We were literally unarmed; there was only the crew of the flying-boat and myself. But I walked through the streets and

went into the hospitals, and talked to people about the effects of the bomb, and they were quite indifferent.

Pushed Through a Wall

"After that I went into Korea, and joined up with the Russians." Silk began to grin for the first time. Suddenly he laughed, and slapped his shin.

"Got mixed up with a lot of vodka, and got pushed through a wall! A Russian major pushed me through a wall, so I returned the compliment and pushed him through a window!"

"What exactly was the nature of the wall?"

"It was a Korean peasant house. All it amounted to was this—the Russian major, in a — well, a moment of extreme friendliness, slapped me on the back so hard, that he pushed me through the wall. Accidentally I reciprocated in equal friendliness and pushed him through a window.

"The Russians were very friendly indeed. They actually showed more interest in us than we did in them. There was very little conversation. It was mostly singing and drinking and hearty slaps. There were slaps that night that brought one to one's knees!"

After Korea, Silk went to Shanghai and covered the surrender of the Japanese forces in China; then the war criminals in Japan; then he came to New Zealand.

Working for "Life"

He says he likes working for *Life*, and calls it "the most satisfactory paper in the world to work for."

"It's the most satisfactory because they use your stuff as you send it to them. They don't turn it into their idea of how the story ought to read. If they send you to a country, it's *you* that does the story, not them. They don't turn

it round to fit their preconceived ideas. That's absolutely unique in journalism."

I asked Silk what was the time-lag between the preparation of copy and the actual publication. *Life* prints 5,000,000 copies each week. I wanted to know how soon a *Life* photographer's work appears in print after it reaches New York.

The edition closes, he told me, at 6.0 p.m. on Saturday. On the following Wednesday, 5,000,000 copies are on sale all over the United States. The whole issue is made up in New York, and laid out there. Everything is photographed as it is done, and sent off to

Below: COLONEL KINGORO HASHIMOTO, a leader of the Black Dragon Society, gave Silk's camera this baleful glance



A HOT BATH at Omori Prison: Japan's former Cabinet Ministers, Iwamura, Suzuki, and Admiral Tereshima, photographed by Silk in a hot bath in the prison which James Bertram has described to "Listener" readers. In this one bath, he and about 500 others had to wash, within 20 minutes.