

SILK: ARTHUR GEORGE

Known as George

Born: 17 November 1916, Levin, New Zealand

Married: 26 Nov 1947, San Gabriel, California, USA

To: Margery Gray Schieber (b. 9 Dec 1924, Los Angeles – present)

Died: 23 October 2004, Norwalk, Fairfield, Connecticut, USA

Cremated: ashes spread in Long Island Sound, Connecticut, USA and in New Zealand

Honours

New York Art Directors' Gold Medal, 1961

***Life* Magazine Photographer of the Year, 1961, '63, '64, '65
by the National Press Photographers Association**

**Photographer of the Year, 1964
by the American Society of Magazine Photographers**

Westport Arts Award for Visual Arts, 2000

George's parents were:

Arthur Alfred (1868 – 1962) & Emma Constance (nee Naylor) (1884 – 1959).

He had ***one brother & three sisters:***

Lillian Louise (1907-1993)	married Albert Cooke
Sylvia Constance (1911 -)	married Philip Bond, predeceased her father, so died before 1962
Ivy Iola (1915-1948)	married George Morgan
Ivan Nelmes (1919 – 2013)	

George & Margery had three children:

Stuart Naylor Silk (b. 9 Nov 1948 – present)
Georgiana Bulfinch Silk (b.27 Feb 1950 – present)
Shelley Gray Silk (married name Wehrly) (b.4 May 1953 – present)



George's American wife, Margery, and children are unsure how George came to be born in Levin. They only know his father, Arthur, arrived in New Zealand in November 1880, at the age of 12, along with his parents, Thomas and Eliza, and three siblings. They had come aboard the barque 'Hannah Landies' from Glasgow. Arthur was known to be very musical, indeed he had perfect pitch.

George's mother's family, the Naylor, had come to this country five years earlier, in 1875, from Nottinghamshire, England. His mother Constance was born in Bluff.

Arthur, Constance and their young family remained in Levin for only two years after George was born, then moved to Nelson, then Auckland.

George left school, Auckland Grammar, in 1930 at the age of fourteen and worked on a farm for two years. Photography had become a hobby by this time and back in Auckland he worked in a camera store, learning his craft there in the mid-1930s. He was also pursuing what would become his other life-long passions - fly-fishing, sailboat racing, skiing, and motorcycling.

When war broke out in 1939, George was required to enlist. His daughter Georgiana recalls that he hated guns but saw an opportunity to photograph the horrors of war so there would never be another. This raised the prospect of becoming a war correspondent.

He applied to the New Zealand Government, but was declined. So, he took his portfolio of sports photographs across the Tasman and directly to the office of the Australian Prime Minister in Canberra. He was hired as a combat photographer for the Australian Ministry of Information, covering the Middle East, North Africa, Greece, and New Guinea.

When the stronghold of Tobruk in Libya fell to the Germans under Field Marshal Rommel in June 1942, George was captured with Australian soldiers, but escaped after 10 days in captivity.

Later that year, he was in New Guinea where he took what was probably his most famous photo, in December 1942. This was of a blinded Australian soldier (Private George Whittington), barefoot, eyes bandaged, being led to a field hospital by a Papuan tribesman (Raphael Oimbari). It was taken during a 300-mile trek with Australian forces over New Guinea's Kokoda Trail, dodging Japanese bullets & enduring malaria.



This iconic image is still revered in Australia and was reproduced in a bronze statue.

Dissatisfied with the way the Ministry of Information was selecting his photos, George sent a couple of examples to the American *Life* magazine, several months apart. One was the New Guinea battle front photo already described. Another was of a pregnant cow backlit by sun on an early frosty morning in New Zealand - created just before he went to New Guinea. They were both published and there followed the offer of a staff post, which he accepted. He joined *Life* in March 1943.

Thought to be one of the first to use colour film during World War II, George proceeded to follow US troops through Europe. He survived a glider crash in France (fortunate to be seated at the back of the plane), was with the US forces in the 'Battle of the Bulge' during December 1944 and January 1945 and was wounded by a grenade in a river crossing in Germany.

At the end of the war, he commandeered a B29 long-range bomber to take aerial photos of a devastated Japan. He was one of the first, if not the first, photographer to take images of Nagasaki after the atomic bomb was dropped there in August 1945. He also took pictures of Japanese war criminals awaiting trial in post-war Tokyo.

In 1946 he shot a photo essay on famine in China's Hunan province, but by this time George was turning away from war and political conflicts and returned to adventure sports and exploration stories, the Olympics, the America's Cup, conservation and children. He was yearning to re-live the

world of nature he had grown up with in New Zealand – hiking, fishing, sailing and skiing.

In the early 1950s he became a United States citizen and moved to Westport, Connecticut (not far north of New York City) with his wife Margery and three children Stuart, Georgiana and Shelley in 1956. He would remain with *Life* as a staff photographer until the magazine closed down at the end of 1972.

Margery said he disliked baseball & football as they took place in stadia full of screaming fans when his preference was for peace and quiet. However, he applied his ingenuity and became a specialist in outdoor sports photography. His mantra was to bring “the most excitement possible to the viewer”. He did this by getting to know his subject as thoroughly as possible and even participating wherever he could.



Gunhild Larking at the [1956 Olympic Games](#). Published

To get unique perspectives he “took the camera away from his eye”, by which he meant mounting it on equipment, like the surface of a ski or the end of a surfboard. He adapted a racetrack's photo-finish camera to catch the fluid blur of an athlete in motion. This was notably celebrated in a picture taken at the 1960 US Olympic trials in Palo Alto, California, showing an athlete who appears to be stretched width-wise, offset to unnatural dimensions. George felt such distortion best expressed motion.

Applying wide-angle and very long lenses and photo-finish cameras all further enhanced his ability to snatch images from previously impossible vantage points, making the photographer seem invisible by taking the viewer into the scene to ‘feel’ as well as ‘see’ the shot - inviting the question: how did he do that?

On a purportedly easier civilian assignment for *Life* in 1952, George was the only photographer with an Air Force expedition setting up a weather station 100 miles from the North Pole. To get the shot, he had to overcome minus 60-degree cold, which froze his 12 cameras one by one.

George’s best images – such as his 1962 *Perfect 10-point landing* (shot so the young diver’s entry to the water can be seen above and below the waterline), or his bold abstract shot of *Gretel and Weatherly* racing prow to prow in the America’s Cup trials of 1962 – mean far more in spirit and symbolic value than as a record of sporting achievement.

"The best sports photography speaks of a poetry of bodily discipline & human aspiration to excel".

George was respected for his versatility, persistence, courage and doing whatever it took to 'get the picture'. A solo retrospective of his work at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, some years ago, was aptly titled "Going to Extremes".

He published a book "War in New Guinea" which included the iconic photo mentioned above. The book was entirely his own work – script, photos and layout.

In December 1972 he was in Nepal, shooting an assignment on Himalayan game parks, when he received news that the magazine had folded. According to the 1977 book "*That Was the Life*" he replied by saying, "Your message.....badly garbled. Please send one half million dollars additional expenses."

Thereafter, he became a freelance photographer. He made a film about sailing, "The Many Moods of a Thistle" featuring the 17-foot single design Thistle sailboat.

His work is included in critical surveys published throughout the world and can be seen in the War Memorial Museum, Canberra, Australia; the LIFE Gallery, New York; and the New Zealand Centre for Photography, Wellington. His pictures have been hung in the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Baltimore Museum of Art.

In the book "Life Photographers: What They Saw" (Bullfinch/Little, Brown, 1998) by John Loengard, George tried to sum up his gift simply by saying: "I left school when I was 14. I had no knowledge of the classics or how painters used light and things like that. Maybe it was already in me."

He passed away from congenital heart failure just short of his 88th birthday in October 2004. His widow Margery still survives him (in 2021) in Westport, Connecticut.



George Silk *Blinded soldier, New Guinea (Pte George Whittington being led to an aid station by Raphael Oimbari), 1942, gelatin silver photograph,*