

28 *Frontline Soldier with Canteen, Saipan*

1944

Gelatin silver print on paper, 13 1/4 x 10 1/2 in.

Museum Purchase, 1978.0010.001

W. EUGENE SMITH WANTED HIS GRAPHIC WAR PHOTOGRAPHS TO SHOW PEOPLE THE TRUTH ABOUT WAR AND CHANGE THE WORLD:

*I would that my photographs might be, not the coverage of a news event, but an indictment of war – the brutal corrupting viciousness of its doing to the minds and bodies of men; and, that my photographs might be a powerful emotional catalyst to the reasoning which would help this vile and criminal stupidity from beginning again.<sup>1</sup>*

A naive view, perhaps, even if Smith was not the first – or the last – photographer to hold it. It is unlikely, however, that anyone ever acted upon that belief with quite the same passion. Arguably the greatest of all photojournalists, Smith photographed World War II with wild intensity and unrivaled skill. He produced images that continue to serve as one measure of war photography, and he has a secure place in that long line of masters from the Civil War photographers associated with Mathew Brady through Robert Capa and David Douglas Duncan to Donald McCullin and James Nachtwey.

The war in the Pacific was, to borrow from the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, nasty and brutish – but not short. This image is from the island of Saipan, where Smith later took other powerful pictures during mop-up operations, including one of a terrified mother and son trapped in a cave and then flushed out, trying to escape “when there was no escape.” In another, a GI holds a baby; Smith observed, “Unfortunately, it was alive. We hoped it would die.”<sup>2</sup>

Here, Smith worked up close, capturing two soldiers in a simple, strong composition. Whatever his general feelings about war, Smith, like his friend the war correspondent Ernie Pyle, was sympathetic toward regular enlisted men and tried to portray them with “compassionate understanding.”<sup>3</sup> This shot suggests pure need, pure thirst, with the intensity of combat implied by the intensity of a brief respite. The drinking soldier is sharply rendered, set against the slightly out-of-focus but still forceful presence of the soldier looming behind him. This image is all about immediacy, with the camera recording gesture and expression – emphasizing physical details, such as the unshaven face, the grit, the sweat, and, above all, that drink of water.

Smith was seriously wounded in May 1945, during the invasion of Okinawa, and his photographic tour of duty was over. Still recovering a year later, he took a picture of his two small children on a woodland path, emerging from darkness into light. *The Walk to Paradise Garden* (cat. no. 29) attained international fame after serving as the final image in the blockbuster 1955 touring exhibition *The Family of Man* and its accompanying book. But that was later and worlds away. The Saipan photograph offers no hint of that vision of what Smith called “a gentle moment of spirited purity.”<sup>4</sup> In portraying a break from combat, it keeps us focused on the men without losing sight of the war.

Robert Silberman

1. Quoted in Lincoln Kirstein, “W. Eugene Smith: Success or Failure, Art or History,” in W. Eugene Smith, *W. Eugene Smith: His Photographs and Notes* (New York: Aperture, 1969), n.p.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

*The Ulrich's collection includes twenty-two Smith photographs.*



## About the Contributors

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