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.

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."

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." 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. 28) 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." In portraying a break from combat, it keeps us focused on the men without losing sight of the war.

Robert Silberman

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

The Ulrich’s collection includes twenty-two Smith photographs.
Advisory Board and Staff

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

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Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicky Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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