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CAMARADERIE IN THE U.S. NAVY: PHOTOS FROM WORLD WAR II

By John Otis, June 13, 2017



During the Second World War, Edward Steichen was among a select group of naval photographers who documented combat in the Pacific theater. While some members of the Naval Aviation Photographic Unit, much like Mr. Steichen himself, are well-known for their contributions to photo history — notably Wayne Miller and Fenno Jacobs — others had a lower profile.

Fons Iannelli was among those unsung talents. He took up photography at 21, just a couple of years before Mr. Steichen recruited him to join his maritime group of documentary photographers in 1941. Now, a recently-uncovered trove of photographs taken by Mr. Iannelli, including both wartime prints and postwar work, are featured in an exhibit opening Thursday at Steven Kasher Gallery in New York.

None of Mr. Iannelli's wartime photos depict his comrades engaged in combat. Instead, they show daily life at sea, in keeping with Mr. Steichen's directive that his photographers shoot a range of activities. He showed how the sailors lived: the quarters they slept in, the military drills they ran; maintaining planes and celebrating holidays. Camaraderie was at the heart of the work, which is unmistakably informed by the aesthetic that Mr. Steichen championed, and adheres to Mr. Steichen's impeccable standard for print quality.

"He had an eye for extracting the significance from the moment," Mr. Kasher said of Mr. Iannelli's images. "Even very mundane moments on an aircraft carrier, if you can call it mundane because there's a world war going on."

After the war, Mr. Iannelli — who died in 1988 — went on to enjoy a fruitful and lucrative career as a professional photographer, with his work featured in magazines like *McCall's* and *Life*. He was also a founder of Scope Associates, a

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cooperative agency of photojournalists. Among the postwar photos featured in the exhibit are two stories of American families.

“You get a very strong sense of a photographer who was able to get into very close, intimate situations,” Mr. Kasher said. “Yet you don’t feel he changed or manipulated those situations.”

One of the stories he did was of a middle-class suburban family — the father worked at Ford — that lived in suburban America. A second story of a family in Harlan County, Kentucky, was part of a piece that ran in the “How America Lives” section of a 1947 issue of Ladies’ Home Journal. Titled “Meet a Soft-Coal Miner’s Family,” the eight-page spread included conversations with the family, along with a detailed breakdown of their income and expenses.

“He’s created a rounded story of both these families the way he created a rounded story of the Navy family, so to speak,” Mr. Kasher said.

The photographs show the families’ activities: someone doing kitchen chores, a parent reading to a child, or everyone enjoying a picnic. Mr. Iannelli also followed the fathers to their jobs. The work exemplifies Mr. Iannelli’s knack for rendering beautifully lighted work that captured the small dramas of everyday life.

“That’s what photographers of this type are called to do, that’s their vocation, to reflect ourselves back to ourselves,” Mr. Kasher said. “That creates the nation in a certain sense.”