

COURTESY OF MACARTHUR MUSEUM OF ARKANSAS MILITARY HISTORY

# “I Never Had Any Idea It Would Get Home”

Ellis Underwood,  
Stanley Troutman, and  
the legacy of a  
split second on Saipan.

**This iconic photo taken by photographer Stanley Troutman ran in the July 24, 1944, edition of the *St. Petersburg Times* with the caption, “Hot and weary after fighting on the western beaches below Saipan’s Mt. Marpi, PFC T. Ellis Underwood ... takes a long cool drink of water from his canteen. Beads of perspiration glisten on the weary Leatherneck’s unshaven face.”**

By Geoffrey W. Roecker

**P**rivate First Class Thomas Ellis Underwood was not thinking about the grand scope of history on the afternoon of July 8, 1944. He just wanted a drink of water.

Sweat beaded on his brow and dripped in rivulets down his face, tracing lines through a few days’ accumulations of dust and grime. Twenty-three days of beating sun, followed by rain almost every single night, had bleached the cotton twill of his clothing in ever-lightening shades of green. He untucked his helmet cover, letting it hang down over his neck like an old-fashioned havelock, and rolled his sleeves as high as he could. In the time-tested tradition of the combat veteran, Underwood carried only what he needed: canteens and carbine, shovel and shelter half, rations and smokes, and whatever small personal items would fit into the gas mask bag which doubled as his haversack. There were only two exceptions—the pistol on his hip and the Japanese sword tucked under his arm. They were extra weight, but discarding either was out of the question.

The heat was oppressive, even for a Florida native like Underwood, and he

had plenty on his mind—another day of heavy fighting, another day as an acting squad leader—as he unscrewed the canteen cap and took a swig of tepid water. As he did, he heard the double click of camera shutters. Two photographers approached, inquiring about his name, hometown and unit; they scribbled in their notepads as rifle shots popped a few yards away. Underwood lit a cigarette and looked back over his shoulder. One of the cameramen snapped a final frame. Then Underwood returned to his squad, and

the photographers wandered off in search of new subjects. Neither party thought much about the encounter.

This chance meeting between PFC T.E. Underwood and the two photographers—Stanley Troutman and W. Eugene Smith—resulted in some of the most iconic pictures from the Pacific theater of operations, and a legacy that would long outlive the Marine with the famous face.

Thomas Ellis Underwood was born in Parker, Fla., on May 16, 1922. His family moved from the Panhandle to Pinellas



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**Brothers Cpl George Washington “Joe” Underwood, Alpheus “Edison” Underwood, and Ellis Underwood were photographed together for the Oct. 28, 1942, issue of their hometown newspaper, the *St. Petersburg Times*.**





Marines advance on an enemy dugout beside a railroad track, Saipan, July 8, 1944. A few minutes later the Japanese charged out but did not reach the Marines.

SSGT MAURICE E. GARBNER, USMC

County in 1925, and young “Ellis” grew up in St. Petersburg with four older siblings and a kid brother. Their father, George Underwood, worked as a mechanic and general laborer; Cora Lee Crosson Underwood kept their small house in order. All of the children completed grammar school and averaged a year or two of high school before joining the workforce or starting families of their own. Three of the boys, John, George “Joe,” and Ellis, were on the payroll of the Florida Fishing Tackle Manufacturing Company.

This job suited Ellis to a T. He was an athletic, outdoorsy youth who enjoyed baseball, basketball, football, swimming, hunting and horseback riding. Fishing was his great passion, and for the aspiring angler, working in the shop that made

Barracuda Brand Lures (the “Famous Fish Getters”) must have been a dream come true. Ellis dropped out of St. Petersburg High School in 1940 and began working full-time. He specialized in winding fishing rods made from hand-selected Burma cane and took home \$18 a week for his labors. Whenever he could, Ellis took his own rod and tackle box down to his favorite spot—John’s Pass at Madeira Beach—and spent his time casting for trout.

As war clouds gathered on the American horizon, the Underwood family prepared to meet the storm. Joe Underwood quit the tackle factory in August 1941 to enlist in the Army. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, John picked up a defense job at the Tampa shipyards. Ellis also moved

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on; he tried his hand at plumbing but registering for the Selective Service seems to have planted the idea of volunteering. In October 1942, Ellis and his youngest brother Edison entered a Navy recruiting office together. Edison emerged as an



apprentice seaman, while Ellis signed up for the Marine Corps.

One year later, PFC Underwood was a proud member of Company B, First Battalion, 24th Marines—part of the brand new 4th Marine Division. He could march for miles, live outdoors without complaint, maneuver a rubber boat in heavy surf, camouflage a position, lead a fire team, and had appeared as an extra in the Hollywood feature film, “Guadalcanal Diary.” “Like the real thing,” he wrote to his parents, though he was glad he only had to shoot the amphibious landing scene once. He was capable with a rifle, dangerous with a carbine, and an expert with a bayonet. His disciplinary record was clean—a glance into his baggage revealed three New Testaments—and his professional conduct was beyond reproach.

Ellis soon proved his worth in combat. His battalion participated in the battle of Roi-Namur in the Marshall Islands, and Company B was on the receiving end of the only serious Japanese counterattack. A banzai charge slammed into their lines before dawn on Feb. 2, 1944; the company

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fell back briefly, reorganized, and retook the lost ground. While the engagement was small by later standards, it still cost B/1/24 a lot of blood and pain—including most of their 3rd Platoon being “virtually wiped out.” As they recuperated at Camp Maui that spring, PFC Underwood was placed in charge of a four-man fire team—his first foray into small unit leadership.

He would put this new experience to the test on Saipan.

While Ellis Underwood trained in the territory of Hawaii, Stanley Troutman was getting the hang of life in uniform. As a photographer for Acme Newspictures in Los Angeles, Calif., Troutman’s portfolio included homicide scenes, film premieres, sporting events, natural disasters, and the celebrity trials of Charlie Chaplin and Errol Flynn. Press photographers were exempt from the draft, but Troutman didn’t feel right about sitting out the war. When the chance to go overseas and shoot for the War Picture Pool arose in early 1944, he jumped at it. “Acme bought me an officer’s uniform,” Troutman remembered. “In the Navy, we were [equivalent to] a Lieutenant Commander. I wore my officer’s uniform to Pearl Harbor—and then the Marine Corps outfitted me with the fatigues and high-top shoes I wore for the next couple of years.”

Troutman was a well-seasoned photographer but received absolutely no military training before drawing his first assignment. “I was not issued a weapon,” he remarked. Instead, he carried a “45”



**Co B, 1st Bn, 24th Marines on Tinian, Aug. 5, 1944. Ellis Underwood is shown at left in the back row holding a flag. (Photo courtesy of Geoffrey W. Roecker)**



Speed Graphic—the same camera he used with the civilian press. His editors offered some sage advice: “Don’t go in with the first wave.” They wanted him alive—besides, the pictures of a devastated beachhead would have a greater impact on readers back home. So Troutman packed up his gear and boarded a transport for the Mariana Islands.

As planned, Troutman arrived on Saipan a few days after the Marines hit the beach. This was his first assignment, and the transition from civilian photographer to combat correspondent was extremely jarring. “Being away from my wife and daughter was an adjustment,” he said. “I had to eat C-rations, which tasted like dog food.” Fortunately, he found a teacher in W. Eugene Smith, another professional photographer with previous combat experience. “We were the only two [press] photographers assigned to Saipan,” Troutman continued. “Every day we went out to take pictures. The Marines supplied all the film. I kept track of each shot by hand on a notepad, which I sent along with the film packs to Pearl Harbor for processing and censorship.” Even as he got a handle on his job, Troutman was still disturbed by the sights and sounds of Saipan. “Adjusting to seeing death was the most difficult.”

By July 8, 1944, Ellis Underwood was no stranger to the sight of death. He landed on June 15—not in the first wave, but close enough to catch some artillery on the way to the front line. Early the next morning, a shell killed his battalion commander, LtCol Maynard C. Schultz; that night, Japanese infiltrators attacked “Baker” Co’s lines using civilians as shields. The horrifying scene was burned into memory: Marines blown in half by grenades, shooting their buddies in the confusion, sobbing when daylight revealed civilian women and children among the dead. In the days that followed, they were shelled by flat-trajectory antiaircraft guns at Aslito Airfield, crossed burned-out cane fields, withstood an attack by Japanese tanks, scaled the mountainous central spine of Saipan, and suffered countless personal indignities, tragedies, and triumphs along the way. They caught the flank of the biggest banzai attack of the Pacific War but suffered only a handful of minor casualties. Underwood’s platoon was whittled down to the point where he was an acting squad leader. He fell sick at the end of June but was back in action by Independence Day, anxious to see the end of the battle.

The atmosphere felt different that morning. “Little opposition was encountered,” recalled 1stLt Frederic A. Stott in his book, “Saipan Under Fire.” “And many civilians

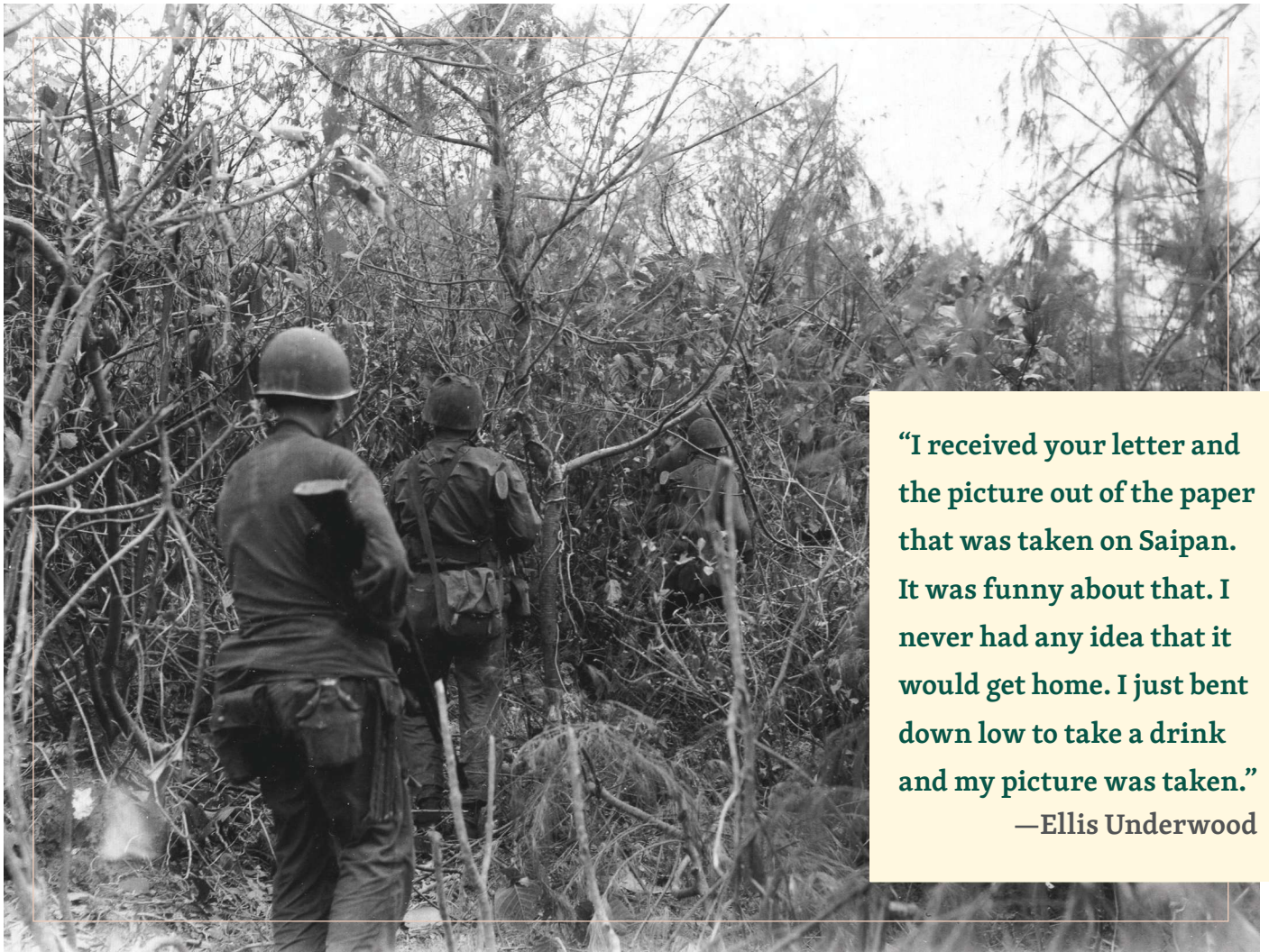
**Photojournalist Stanley Troutman is pictured here with his Speed Graphic camera. (Photo courtesy of Gayle Rindge)**



**Saipan casualty reports are recorded at the 1/24 command post. From left, SgtMaj William Dolly, Sgt William Burbridge, and Sgt William D. Sammon.**

SGT NICK RAGUS, USMC





“I received your letter and the picture out of the paper that was taken on Saipan. It was funny about that. I never had any idea that it would get home. I just bent down low to take a drink and my picture was taken.”

—Ellis Underwood

**Fighting their way through thick brush, Marines slowly approach their last objective in the heart of the Japanese empire on Saipan, July 8, 1944. (Photo by SSgt Maurice E. Garber, USMC)**

joyfully emerged from their hideouts as we scrambled down a cave-infested cliff line. Among those whom we released were two priests, several nuns, and many of their Chamorro followers. Their joy gave us some indication of the welcome our brothers-in-arms were receiving at the same time from the people of Normandy.” The good fortune did not last long. “The beaches extending north from Tanapag were honeycombed with an intricate series of trenches, dugouts, and low-lying pillboxes” continued Stott. “At close range [the Japanese] opened up with all they had, stopped half the battalion short of the sea, and inflicted heavy casualties, including Lt Al Santilli of Fordham football fame.” Tank support ended the threat, but “it was very depressing to have suffered so heavily at a time when we thought the organized opposition practically ended.”

It was a red-letter day for Stanley Troutman, too. “My experience up front was something I’ll never forget,” he wrote to his wife. “Gene Smith and myself [*sic*] decided to go for a day and see if we couldn’t get some good action pictures.”

After spending his first night in a foxhole, Troutman joined the advance to the beach. “Things were going along swell until a Japanese machine gun pinned us down,” he continued. “No kidding, honey, I stayed on my stomach for two hours. Finally a tank came along and knocked them out. During the time I was pinned down, one fellow behind me and one at my side was wounded so guess the good lord [*sic*] was with me.” Troutman’s big Speed Graphic was hard to handle under fire, but Smith clicked away with his 35 mm camera, recording the rescued civilians, the Marines fighting over a farmhouse, and the tanks rolling up to the rescue.

Then they spotted the tired, begrimed Marine reaching for his canteen. A few hundredths of a second for each photograph, a few more moments to take some notes. “4th Division Marine PFC T.E. Underwood (24th Bat.) of St. Petersburg, Florida,” wrote Smith. “A portrait of a weary warrior who has been through one of the toughest days of his life. And still at the moment the picture was taken under fire.” Troutman jotted down similar notes:

“T.E. Underwood, St. Petersburg FL, Marine drinking water from canteen.” Then it was over. Ellis went back to his squad and the photographers, tired and low on film, shot a few more stills and headed back to the press tent. They had captions to write and film to mail off to Pearl Harbor. Neither they nor Ellis had any idea how the pictures turned out.

Ellis Underwood survived the last few days of fighting on Saipan; he witnessed the bloody mass suicide of civilians at Marpi Point and took part in a three-day mopping up mission before arriving at a rear area camp. He received a field promotion to corporal, welcomed replacements to his squad, and fired off a few letters to his parents. “Just a few words to let you know that I’m okeh [*sic*]. I know you’ve been looking for a letter from me for some time, but I haven’t had much chance to write until now. I’m on Saipan and have been since the first day of [the] invasion! It was plenty tough and the fighting was rugged, but it is pretty well mopped up now. In fact, I suppose you people at home know more about what is



going on than I do.” Ellis took care not to mention the preparations afoot for another invasion—Tinian—scheduled for July 24, 1944. “I’m sending Pop a Japanese saber [*sic*] and bayonet that I picked up during the operation,” he continued, adding that he wanted “to come home, go fishing, and catch a few of those trout that are running through the Pass now. There’s plenty of water around me, but I haven’t been fishing for anything except a few Japanese. I got seven on this operation and helped get a lot more!”

The news of his whereabouts beat the letter home. Stanley Troutman’s photograph of Underwood was printed, passed by censors, and released to the War Picture Pool. Newspapers liked to print “hometown hero” stories of local boys in action, and the *St. Petersburg Times* ran the photo under the headline “St. Petersburg to Saipan,” on July 24, 1944. “Hot and weary after fighting on the western beaches below Saipan’s Mt. Marpi, Marine PFC T. Ellis Underwood, son of Mr. and Mrs. G. A. Underwood, 6229 29th Street North, takes a long cool drink of water from his canteen,” announced the caption. “Beads of perspiration glisten on the weary Leatherneck’s unshaven face.” George and Cora Underwood, thrilled to see their son alive and well, clipped out the photo and dropped it in the mail.

The clipping reached Ellis just as the battle for Tinian was coming to an end. “I received your letter and the picture out of the paper that was taken on Saipan,” he wrote on Aug. 5. “It was funny about that. I never had any idea that it would get home. I just bent down low to take a drink and my picture was taken. The fellow asked me my name and home address. Heavy fighting was going on where the picture was taken and the island wasn’t secured for about six or eight days later.” A few days later, Cpl Underwood and the survivors of Baker Co were on their way back to Camp Maui.

The battles for the Mariana Islands concluded, but the war was far from over. With his baptism of fire behind him, Stanley Troutman became a prolific combat photographer. He followed Marines, soldiers, and airmen into combat on Tinian, Guam, Peleliu and the Philippines; he photographed prisoners of war being released from prison camps in China. At the very end of the war, he turned down a choice spot for the surrender ceremony on the USS *Missouri* and hitched a ride

to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, becoming the first American newsman to witness the aftermath of the atomic bombs. Troutman’s stark photographs of the ruined cities were among the best of his long career.

W. Eugene Smith, shooting for *Life* Magazine, also went on to further combat; his photographs of Saipan, Iwo Jima and Okinawa are among the best-known images of WW II. He shot three frames of Ellis Underwood; two made it to print and are easily recognized today. The last frame, showing Underwood looking back over his shoulder with a cigarette dangling from his lips, symbolized the suffering and determination of a nation—a sentiment so universal that many families have seen their own relative staring out of the

in his hands, so he picked up a discarded Browning Automatic Rifle and “valiantly led a spirited attack” with “aggressive courage and inspiring leadership.” The position fell, but not before Ellis went down with shrapnel wounds in his back. He died on the battlefield at the age of 22.

At last, the war ended. The other Underwood boys came home safe and sound and went back to civilian life. George and Cora Underwood received their son’s medals—the Bronze Star with combat “V,” the Purple Heart, his commendation for Saipan, unit citations and campaign ribbons—and a little box of his belongings including his glasses, his Bibles, his letter-writing kit, Christmas cards, and a cigarette lighter. These mementos joined the Japanese sword



Geoffrey W. Roecker

**After he died during the fighting on Iwo Jima, 22-year-old Ellis Underwood was buried in Sunnyside Cemetery in St. Petersburg, Fla.**



masterful photograph. Notably, Underwood is sometimes thought to be Army Sergeant Angelo Klonis, although further research debunks this claim.

Ellis Underwood never knew his status as an icon. In February 1945, he landed on Iwo Jima—his fourth campaign in 12 months. After a few days of fighting, he was evacuated to a transport ship and treated for a contusion on his head. The wound was not enough to be his ticket off the island, and on March 1, 1945, he returned to the fray.

When shipping out for Iwo Jima, the Marines of Co B, 1st Bn, 24th were told, “We’re sending you into the jaws of death, and we want you to bring back the jawbones.” And on March 4, Corporal Underwood did his best to follow those orders. As his platoon advanced into the “Meat Grinder,” a hidden Japanese fortification opened fire. Ellis deployed his squad; a bullet shattered the carbine

and bayonet sent home from Saipan. Cora never got over her loss; she died in December 1946 and was buried in St. Petersburg’s Sunnyside Cemetery. Today, most of the family rests in a small plot in this unassuming cemetery—including Thomas Ellis Underwood, a young man immortalized in film.

*Author’s note: Stanley Madison Troutman passed away on Jan. 2, 2020, at the age of 102.*

*Author’s bio: Geoffrey W. Roecker is a researcher and writer based in upstate New York. His extensive writings on the WW II history of 1st Battalion, 24th Marines, including a series on the photos of Ellis Underwood, is available at [www.1-24thmarines.com](http://www.1-24thmarines.com). Roecker is the author of “Leaving Mac Behind: The Lost Marines of Guadalcanal” and advocates for the return of MIA personnel with his project Missing Marines. 🐼*