



FACING HISTORY

CREW: The Men of the U.S.S. *TEXAS*

By Marisa C. Sánchez

Photographs by Will Michels

Interviews by Ephraim Dickson



Unknown Photographer

Band IX Aboard USS Texas—1940

Vintage gelatin silver photograph, 1940

Collection of Will Michels

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Marisa C. Sánchez is Curatorial Assistant for Photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This article is reprinted from the Spring 2005 issue of *SPOT Magazine*.

During his last semester as an architecture student at Pratt Institute in New York, Will Michels made a life-changing decision to pursue photography seriously. For fifteen years now, he has been fully engaged in the medium and has found an eye for portraiture. In 1994, he began his first personal body of work, in which he sought to examine and record on film his own image through self-portraits. Every Friday morning for six months, he woke up and shot three rolls of film, documenting himself in his apartment. For Michels, this regimen served to better teach him

photographic techniques and the mechanisms of the camera, but it also revealed his tremendous self-discipline and understanding of the human body in relation to the camera's lens. During these private hours, Michels developed a lasting knowledge of photography and his own practice; it was at this time that Michels discovered the square format, which dominates his work today. As a result of these experiences, his training as an architect and his work as a photographer merge with full force in his ongoing project, *CREW: The Men of the U.S.S. TEXAS*. The exhibition

includes nearly fifty black-and-white photographs taken by Michels between 1996 and 2003; approximately fifty oral histories conducted by Ephraim Dickson between 1998 and 2002; 28 historic photographs as well as scrapbooks and souvenir photologs made by the crew; and an intranet website available at the show. The result of eight years in the making, Michels' photographs of the veterans is one part of a larger, ambitious attempt to document as many active veterans who served on the ship as possible. These photographs reveal Michels' deep respect for

History of the U.S.S. *TEXAS*

By Leigh Cutler

When the battleship USS *TEXAS* was commissioned on March 12, 1914, her 14-inch guns were the world's largest and she was the most powerful weapon on earth. This technological marvel of her time served with the British Grand Fleet in World War I and was the flagship of the entire United States Navy between the two World Wars. During World War II, an aging USS *TEXAS* supported amphibious invasions in North Africa, Normandy (D-Day), Southern France, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. She and her crew were preparing for the invasion of Japan when the war ended and the Battleship *TEXAS* came home.¹

No longer needed to defend her country, on April 21, 1948 the decommissioned USS *TEXAS* became the

first historic ship museum in the United States. That same year, on the anniversary of Texas Independence, the Battleship *TEXAS* was presented to the State of Texas and commissioned as the flagship of the Texas Navy. In 1983, the *TEXAS* was placed under the stewardship of the Texas Parks and Wildlife; the department's 1,200-acre San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site consists of the Battleground, Monument, and the Battleship *TEXAS*.²

In 1988, through the private donations and efforts of the people and businesses of the State of Texas, in addition to State funds and a generous gift from the Department of the Navy, dry dock overhaul and systematic restoration of the ship began. Instead of peacetime gray, the *TEXAS* was painted Measure 21 blue camouflage, which she wore during service in the Pacific in 1945.³

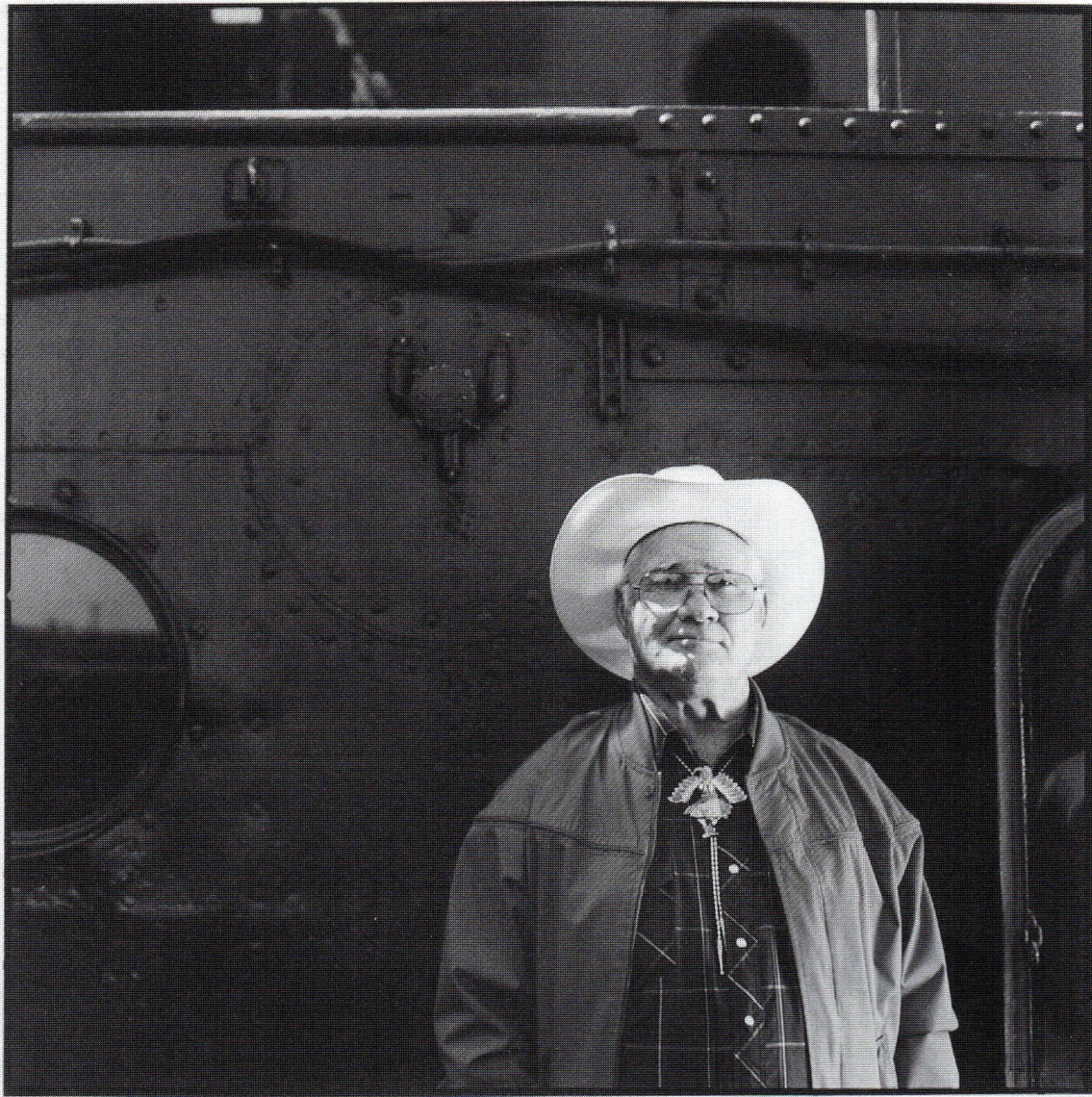
Permanently anchored on Buffalo Bayou and the busy Houston Ship Channel, the ship officially reopened to the public on September 8, 1990. Even so, her restoration is not complete. Throughout the 1990s, many compartments and work areas on the ship were carefully refurbished to portray life on a warship in 1945. Plans are in the works for the next renovation of the *TEXAS* for the fall of this year.⁴ While the search goes on for a suitable dry dock facility that will handle the weight and configuration of the battleship, the Texas legislature has already budgeted \$12.5 million in funding for this renovation.

The *TEXAS* is the only battleship remaining in the world today that served in both World Wars.⁵ Although she is permanently docked, the Battleship *TEXAS* is still serving her country—teaching history to visitors, instead of fighting.



A Rooting Party, USS Texas vs. USS New York Football Game

Vintage gelatin silver photograph, c.1918. Unknown Photographer. Collection of Will Michels



Charlie Griggs—Third Class Petty Officer
U.S.S. TEXAS Veteran: 1941–1943
Gelatin silver photograph, 2003
Photograph by Will Michels

his subjects and their experiences.

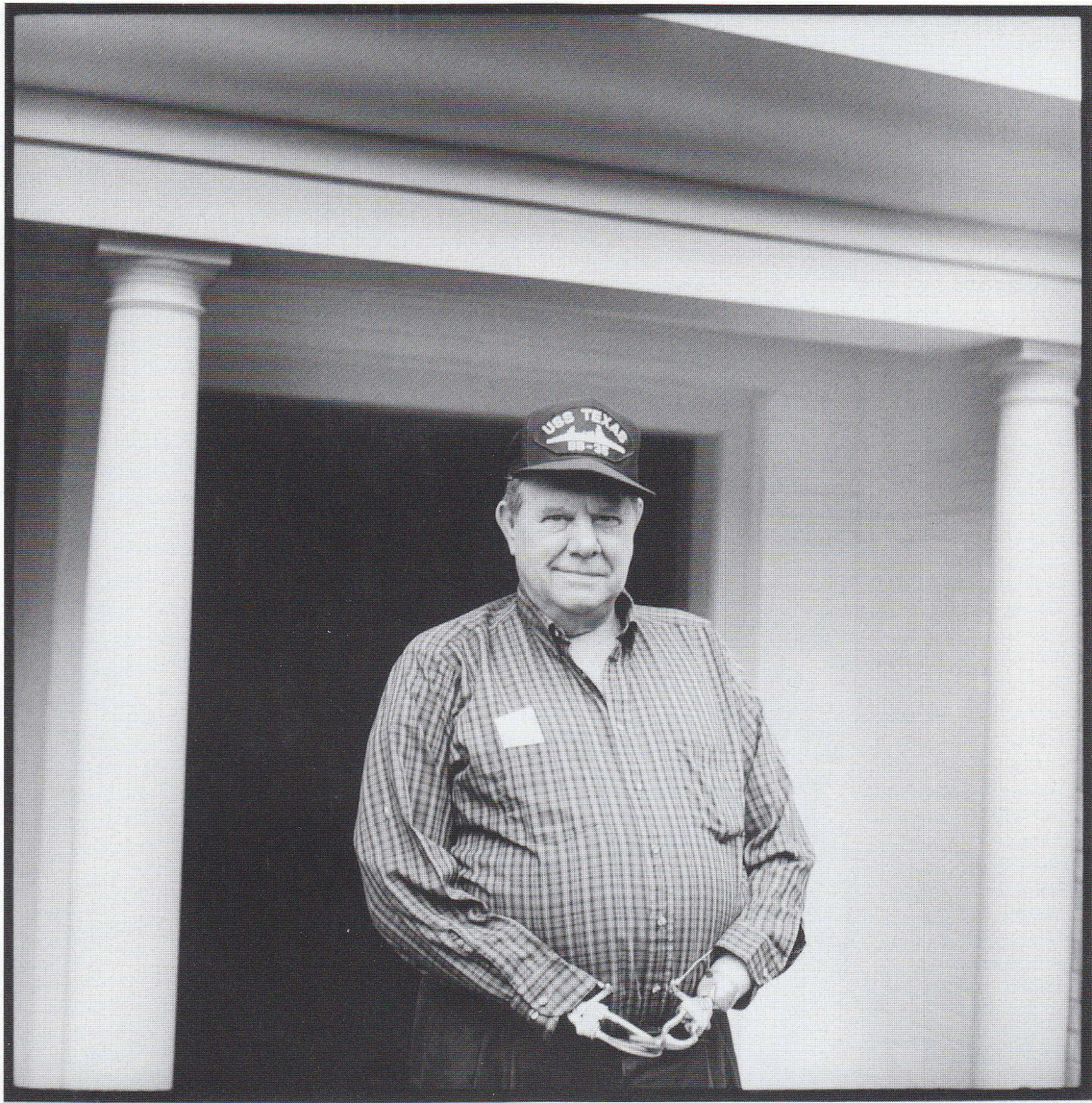
Michels' investment in this project began while working on the battleship as the project architect responsible for its restoration from 1995 to 2000. While restoring the ship, he began to encounter remnants of the lives that once inhabited the spaces, such as a discarded fork discovered behind a locker. These materials haunted the photographer because of his fascination with their origins. Who had used that fork? Who had slept in that bed? Who had walked through that doorway? As each day offered something remarkable, he found the 34-year history of the ship

reflected in the lingering artifacts. Realizing that the history of the USS *TEXAS* was inextricably tied to the individuals who served onboard, he thought about pursuing a photographic project to document the men of the battleship. Plans were under way when he met Ephraim Dickson.

Dickson was a volunteer on the battleship and was organizing a new foundation dedicated to the Battleship *Texas*. He met Michels, and after several conversations, which revealed Dickson's interest in collecting oral histories, the two joined forces. They started looking for funding. Michels had initially received a generous grant from

the Cultural Arts Council of Houston Harris County through the Lawndale Art and Performance Center in 1997. Later he received a fellowship from the Houston Center for Photography (HCP) in 1999 and that same year exhibited sixteen of these photographs at HCP. Since then, the project developed substantially, but the biggest challenge lay ahead—locating over a thousand living veterans scattered throughout the U.S.

Michels began his search with a generic letter mailed to the men that included a simple proposition: "I am writing to ask if I can take your portrait..." As is evident in the ephemera on view in the exhibition, some of



*Maurice Bauer—Fireman First Class
U.S.S. TEXAS Veteran: 1945–1946.
Gelatin silver photograph, 1997
Photograph by Will Michels*

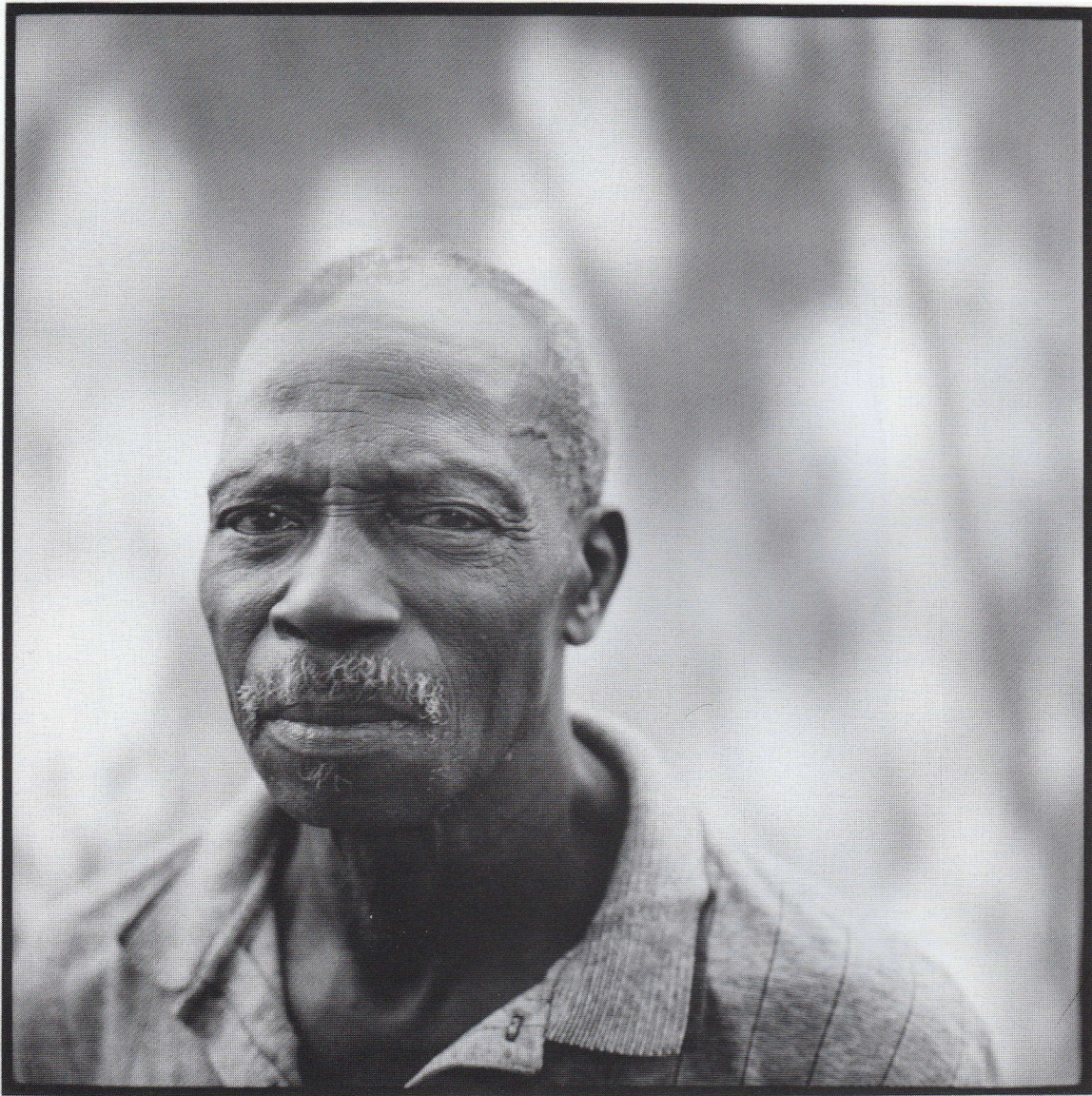
the replies were sent by widows notifying Michels that their husbands would have been eager to share their stories, but had since passed away. These replies underscored the urgency with which Michels had to proceed in order to ensure that these personal histories were recorded before the last of the men are gone.

A vintage panoramic photograph loaned to the exhibition by veteran Charles Denbo illustrates one of the first waves of men to hit the beaches on D-Day in 1944. Michels had originally discovered a copy of this photograph when he interviewed veteran Bob Lang; to Michels' surprise and good-

fortune, Lang had handwritten on the border of the print the names of all 69 men pictured. This photograph was unlike several hundred images Michels uncovered in the battleship archives. He wanted to know *all* of the names of the men pictured from lieutenant, mess cook, storekeeper, war correspondent, to civilian; a hierarchy of service on board the ship that Michels deliberately obliterates in his portraits. Although the labels indicate the veterans' position, Michels' photographs focus on the individual. He presents each veteran singularly and with dignity. In turn, the photographs reward the viewer in the clarity and simplici-

ty of the compositions. Primarily centered in the foreground of the photograph and looking directly into the lens of the camera, some men appear more expressive while others look reluctant.

Michels' photo shoots typically consisted of two hours with each veteran on site in their homes all over the country, from California, Florida, New York, and Illinois. He preferred to photograph the men in their home environments (from dated but comfortable living rooms to well-worn front porches) since his portraits were about "who these individuals are today," not who they were sixty years ago. Despite the comforting



Sam Bellamy—Steward's Mate Second Class
U.S.S. TEXAS Veteran: 1945–1946
Gelatin silver photograph, 1996
Photograph by Will Michels

backgrounds, some portraits, like that of *Ed Reichert, First Lieutenant (1941-1945)*, reveal a past that can never be forgotten. His face, his stance, and lieutenant's cap speak of the weight of responsibilities he bore on the ship during World War II. Unlike any other photograph on view, Reichert's exposes a psychological intensity that reveals the harsher side of the memory of war. His facial expression signals a profound sense of mental anguish and uncertainty.

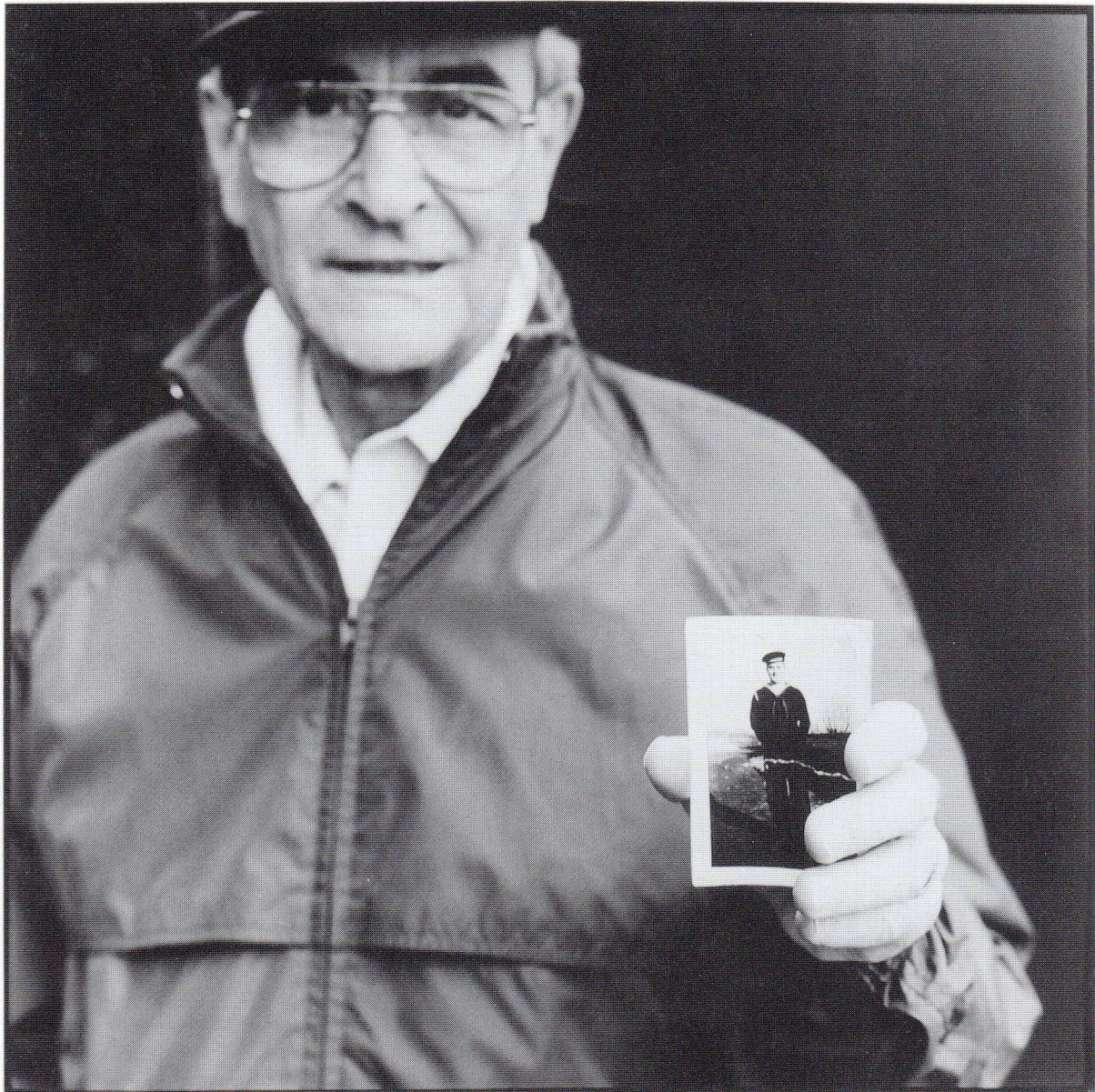
One of the most successful portraits on view is *Julio Zaccagni—Fire Controlman Second Class (1940-1942)*, a shot taken almost by chance. Michels spent several

hours with Zaccagni, talking with him about his job and experience on the battleship. After they had finished talking, Michels packed up his Hasselblad and turned to say goodbye when suddenly Zaccagni reached into his pocket and pulled out a dog-eared snapshot of him as a young man in boot camp. Michels grabbed his camera and captured the proud Zaccagni holding a picture of himself from years ago.

In a few cases, Michels photographed veterans on board the ship, as seen in *Wilmott Ragsdale, War Correspondent Time/Life (June 1944)*. Michels' portrait of the former correspondent places him on the

exact spot where as a young man he narrowly escaped death after leaving the area seconds before a German shell exploded.

Respectful of the long history of photojournalists, Michels included two photographs taken by Ragsdale in the exhibition. One is of an injured shipmate, *Anthony Peppe Being Lowered from the Navigation Bridge, 1944*. Michels successfully contacted Peppe whose portrait shows him standing behind a screen door inside the foyer of his home. Peppe wears a bold USS TEXAS sweat-shirt while a decal of the American flag mounted to the door waves its stars and stripes. Michels' reflec-



*Julio Zaccagni—Fire Controlman Second Class
U.S.S. TEXAS Veteran: 1940–1942
Gelatin silver photograph, 1996
Photograph by Will Michels*

tion is visible in the door behind the patriotic veteran. One is reminded of Robert Frank's photography series *The Americans* (particularly *Barbershop through Screendoor—McClellanville, South Carolina*) and of the self-portraits by Lee Friedlander who photographed his shadow as a way of recording his interaction with American urban landscapes.

For this viewer, these photographs are not only about the veterans but they are also about the photographer—his personal experience on board the battleship and his desire to insert a human element back into the sterility of a ship that had been put to

rest. Each one of these men pictured are part of a pivotal period in American history, yet in their collective efforts the individual becomes absorbed into that history and, over time, memory fades and faces no longer have names. It is through Michels' pursuit of facing that history that he focuses on the individual. What inspires the viewer about his work is not so much how the photographs function independently of each other, but how they function as a whole portrait of a generation of American men who served their country. For Michels, who is donating a set of prints and materials to the Battleship *Texas* archives, it is clear

that this project is more about giving something back to history than challenging contemporary issues or presenting cutting-edge work. The portraits are quiet, thoughtful, and serene. Michels remarked: "In the beginning, I took these portraits for myself... I now see the bigger picture and am eager to share these faces." ★

For more information about Will Michels and his photography, visit www.madebywill.com



Beuron Boyd—Yeoman Second Class
 U.S.S. TEXAS Veteran: 1943–1945
 (born 6 October 1913—died 23 November 2002)
 Gelatin silver photograph, 1996
 Photograph by Will Michels