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kiss as sex assault; participants disagree

By Jacqueline Klimas
jklimas@militarytimes.com

Feminist bloggers are saying the iconic image of a sailor kissing a nurse on V-J Day in Times Square depicts an act of sexual assault.

At least two people, however, disagree — the sailor and the woman, who was actually a dental assistant, in Alfred Eisenstaedt's famous Life magazine photo.

George Mendonsa and Greta Zimmer Friedman — identified as the kissing couple by "The Kissing Sailor," a book published this year by the U.S. Naval Institute — called the moment an act of unbridled celebration.

"I can't think of anybody who considered that as an assault," said Friedman, who exchanges Christmas cards with Mendonsa every year and has appeared with him at several reunion events. "It was a happy event."

London-based blogger "Leopard" wrote a post titled "The Kissing Sailor, or 'The Selective Blindness of Rape Culture,'" on Sept. 30 at www.cratesandribbons.com. She posted a follow-up Oct. 5 to "debunk misconceptions."

Her original post drew more than 600 comments as of Oct. 11, and her work has been cited across the Internet by sites such as the Huffington Post, London's Daily Mail newspaper and other feminist blogs.

'Assault by modern standards'

In her blog, Leopard cites a 2005 interview with Friedman conducted by the Veteran's History Project of the Library of Congress about the kiss between strangers. In the interview, Friedman says she was "grabbed by a sailor" and that she "felt that he was very strong. He was just holding me tight."

"It seems pretty clear, then, that what George had committed would be considered sexual assault by modern standards. Yet, in an amazing feat of willful blindness, none of the articles comment on this," Leopard wrote in the blog post. "Without a single acknowledgement of the problematic nature of the photo that her comments reveal, they continue to talk about the picture in a whimsical, reverent manner."

Friedman doesn't see a problem. "There is just no way that there was anything bad about it," she said. "It was all good news, the best news we'd had for a number of years."

Both Mendonsa and Friedman acknowledged the kiss was a surprise but that it was not unwelcome or offensive. Mendonsa was just excited that he didn't have to return to war, and thankful for the nurses who cared for his wounded shipmates.

"I had just come back from the Pacific. I'd been there for two years and I'd been involved in a lot of battles," said the former sailor, who was stationed aboard the destroyer The Sullivans. "I happened to be glad the war was over and grabbed a nurse because I saw what the nurses did on the hospital ships out there in the Pacific."

Another blog, Feministing.org, analyzed Friedman's body language — a "clenched fist and limp body" — in the photo. The site also examined the reactions of the crowd, drawing attention to the smirking sailors in the background.

Lawrence Verria, co-author of "The Kissing Sailor," pointed out the reaction of another person in the background: an older woman with white hair just to the right of the kissing couple.

"She grins widely throughout the entire scene," Verria said, referencing the four successive frames of the same scene taken by Eisenstaedt. "Obviously, it was a happening being received well by all types of spectators: males, females, young and old."

In her blog post, Leopard criticized people for romanticizing the image where a woman is kissed against her will. Verria agrees that those who view the image as an icon of romance are looking at it the wrong way.

"I think we need to be careful how we characterize a kiss from over 60 years ago, far removed from the day and its circumstances," he said. "Calling it a sexual assault caught on film is not accurate, but also viewing the kiss as romantic as it's often characterized is not accurate. It's a celebration of a war's victorious end."



ALFRED EISENSTAEDT/TIME LIFE PICTURES VIA GETTY IMAGES
Sailor George Mendonsa celebrates the end of World War II by kissing Greta Zimmer Friedman, who he thought was a nurse, in New York City Times Square. A blogger says, based on a 2005 interview with Friedman, the iconic kiss fits the description of sexual assault.

Many sailors expressed a similar love for the image on Navy Times Facebook page.

"That picture right there doesn't scream sexual assault to me. It screams pride, joy, jubilation, feeling of complete euphoria that the war, which had taken so many young men's lives (and yes even women), was finally over," wrote one woman who identified herself as a sailor.

Others sided more with the blogger, writing that just because Friedman didn't press charges doesn't make the kiss OK.

"Are you people LISTENING to yourselves?" a reader wrote. "If you son, sailor or not, grabbed a stranger woman he'd never met in his life and forced himself on her, he'd go to JAIL. I don't care whether he was celebrating or not."

Leopard, who only said she began to think of the kiss as sexual assault after hearing Friedman's account of the event, says people need to stop romanticizing the image as a first step to recognize a woman's right to her own body.

"I'm not saying that we should downplay the exuberance of V-J Day at all. I'm also not trying to vilify George for something he did years ago, in a time where there was less awareness of women's rights," the blogger wrote in an email. "If we ignore the fact that this kiss was not mutual, and instead on calling it romantic, then we send out the message that a woman's bodily autonomy is not that important, and can be sacrificed under special circumstances." □

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