

Solving the case of the kissing sailor

"THE KISSING SAILOR,"

by Lawrence Verria and George Galdorisi. Naval Institute Press. 224 pages. \$23.95.

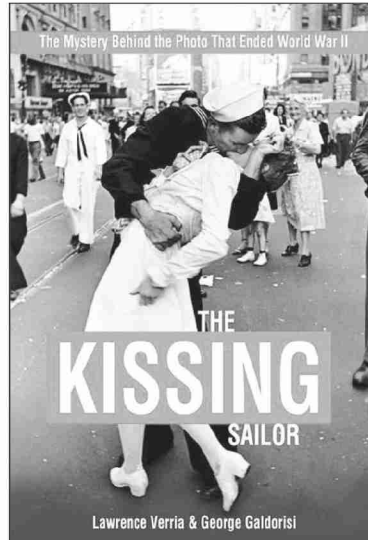
By **PETER DONAHUE**
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Among the famous images from World War II, Alfred Eisenstaedt's photo of a sailor kissing a nurse in New York's Times Square after Japan announced its surrender stands out. Just as Joe Rosenthal's photo of U.S. Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima symbolized the war's sacrifice, Eisenstaedt's epitomized its victory.

Authors Lawrence Verria, a North Kingstown school teacher, and George Galdorisi are to be saluted. Who would have thought an entire book could be written about one black-and-white photo taken on Aug. 14, 1945. But indeed they have collaborated on a painstakingly researched account of this Life magazine image and the controversy it engendered.

For decades, the identities of the embraced couple were unknown, until 1979, when Edith Shain wrote to Eisenstaedt telling him she was the nurse. The photographer visited her and, according to Shain, "looked at my legs and said I was the one."

In 1980, Life magazine organized a VJ Day reunion to unite the nurse and the unidentified sailor. What followed became a public-relations nightmare for the magazine. Many



came forward to claim the honor (there were thousands of celebrants in Times Square that day). One of them was George Mendonsa, of Newport, a Navy veteran who was on leave in Times Square that day. The magazine was so overwhelmed by former sailors that it could not convincingly award the honor to anyone, which triggered a torrent of threats, name-calling and lawsuits. "It's sort of like claiming a lost lottery ticket," said one expert on historical images, explaining the stampede, "except you're not getting paid in cash but in media attention."

Case by case, the authors

meticulously analyze the evidence and eliminate each claimant, from a courtly former New York police officer to a pugnacious North Carolina retiree. In the end, through facial recognition technology and forensic anthropology, it is Mendonsa they anoint as the sailor. Although it is hard to recognize his face, Mendonsa knew he was the one when he first saw the photo: the unique patch of hair on his arm, his large hands — even his girlfriend who later became his wife can be seen smiling over his right shoulder. And the authors declare the nurse was actually a dental assistant named Greta Zimmer, not Shain.

It is a fascinating story, not just for the detective work, but for the stories behind the subjects. Eisenstaedt, a German soldier during World War I, was wounded and the rest of his regiment wiped out during the battle of Flanders. Zimmer, an Austrian Jew, lost her parents at the Auschwitz concentration camp. And Mendonsa survived a colossal Pacific typhoon and numerous kamikaze attacks. All three outfoxed fate and came together for one historic moment.

Author Lawrence Verria will appear with "Kissing Sailor" George Mendonsa on Thursday, June 21, at 7 p.m. at Books on the Square, 471 Angell St., Providence.

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