

# The Kissing Sailor: Surfing the Wave Tops: Part I

## The Five Ps: Picture, Place, Publication, People and Proof



IT IS *THE MOST ICONIC PHOTOGRAPH IN AMERICAN HISTORY*—PERHAPS IN ALL HISTORY. WHY? BECAUSE WHEN PEOPLE LOOK AT THIS PICTURE *V-J DAY 1945, IN TIMES SQUARE* THEY UNDERSTAND WHAT IT FELT LIKE WHEN WORLD WAR II ENDED. BUT UNTIL NOW, WE KNEW VERY LITTLE ABOUT V-J DAY 1945, IN TIMES SQUARE.

And to this day, 65 years after this picture was taken, it is not hyperbole to say that interest in this picture, this event, this moment, has not flagged, it has only intensified. A 14 August 2010 front-page article in the *New York Times* about a woman at the periphery of one of the five photos of the sailor and nurse that day said it best:

It is a defining image of the American century, one that expressed the joy of a nation at its moment of greatest triumph: on the day of the Japanese surrender in World War II was announced, a sailor grabbed a nurse in the middle of Times Square, bent her back and kissed her. That kiss on V-J Day was captured in at least two photographs—one iconic, one merely famous. And for decades since, there have been debates. Who was the sailor? Who was the nurse? A number of people have staked claims, and countless stories have tried to sort them out.

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And for those of us who were there to capture the energy of the re-enactment of that moment on 14 August 2010, the energy and excitement was palpable. This is not ancient history to the overwhelming majority of Americans who were born after this photo was taken. It is a living, breathing, manifestation of who we are. Tellingly, the age span of the throngs who jammed Times Square 65 years to the day after the event ran from teenagers to people in their eighth or ninth decade.

World War II was the most cathartic event of the 20th century. That war lasted six years. More than 50 million people—military and civilian—died. It affected people in the combatant nations in ways that continue to have repercussions today. It changed world politics forever. On the day the war ended, people could finally breathe again.

And even today, more than 65 years after this picture *V-J Day 1945, In Times Square* was taken, people still use it as a metaphor for victory, for honor, for exhilaration and for many other emotions and milestones. *The New York Times* did just this in an 28 August 2010 article; “Winning, Losing and War,” where, referring to President Obama’s pending announcement of the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq, the article offered; “But don’t look for sailors kissing nurses in Times Square.”

When people finished reading James Bradley’s bestseller *Flags of Our Fathers*, they fixed the image of the six Marines raising the American Flag on Mount Suribachi in their minds, and they knew what it felt like to fight and die in World War II. Now, just over a decade after reading that book, when people finish reading *The Kissing Sailor*, they will know what it felt like when World War II ended and the killing and the dying finally stopped. And they will know a great deal more.

They will know that this photo should never have happened. The three principals should have been dead. The photographer’s World War I regiment was wiped out at the Battle of Verdun. The Jewish woman’s family perished in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Hundreds of the sailor’s World War II mates drowned in Typhoon Cobra. Despite

forces that plotted to kill them all, somehow they lived to cross paths in Times Square, NY, on the day World War II ended.

That afternoon the three remained strangers. They exchanged no introductions. They spoke no words. Their viewing of one another was blurred. Had *LIFE* magazine not published a photograph of their public moment, they might have forgotten entirely the few seconds they spent together. But a photo was shot—in the world’s most well-known square, at that location’s most cherished moment and printed in the nation’s most widely circulated magazine. The couple’s embrace epitomized a nation’s exhilaration. Despite the high profile nature of their encounter, mystery has shrouded the occurrence—until today.

*The Kissing Sailor* tells a story that is unique in the annals of American history, about a picture that defines American history. The picture is not obscure, of an unknown moment, or from a forgotten place and time. Taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt, *LIFE* magazine’s “father of photojournalism,” the photograph marks the end of World War II, or V-J Day (Victory over Japan). Referenced by many in numerous countries as the “kissing sailor,” *LIFE*’s most publicized photograph was, in truth, without title for over six decades. In 2008, *LIFE* Books changed that. *LIFE: The Classic Collection* christened its aged offspring, *V-J Day 1945, in Times Square*. The rite of baptism did not extend to the photographed sailor and nurse. Even after the passage of more than 65 years, both remain nameless.

This is not to say people haven’t claimed to be the kissing sailor and nurse. In August 1980 *LIFE* decided to publish a V-J Day retrospective issue. The magazine’s editor, Philip Kunhardt Jr. thought he knew who the nurse was and invited the sailor to come forward. He did. So did many others.

The party-crashers, sailors and nurses, started a national phenomenon three decades ago that has played out across the media in newspapers, magazines, TV news broadcasts, documentaries and other fora as a teeming sea of competing and oftentimes conflicting “evidence” formed. Instead of reaching into the turbulent water and rescuing the real sailor and nurse, *LIFE* failed in its lifeguard duties and elected not

to sort through these claims. They simply walked away from what their 1980 issue started. This self-inflicted mystery persists—until today with the publication of the book, *The Kissing Sailor*.

This is what *Publisher's Weekly*, the most respected book review medium around today, had to say about *The Kissing Sailor*:

On V-J Day in 1945, famed *Life* photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt took the Times Square photo of a sailor's spontaneous kiss that became the single image many associate with the end of WWII. However, the couple's faces were covered, Eisenstaedt did not ask their names, and *Life* never pursued the couple's identity until decades later. When more than a few came forward, the mystery deepened. Even Eisenstaedt misidentified his subjects years later. Retired naval aviator George Galdorisi '70, USN (Ret.), (coauthor, *Act of Valor*) and Rhode Island history teacher Verria sought a solution by researching records, interviewing claimants, studying photos and identifying

others seen nearby. The book features photos, some of which enabled the authors to recreate plausible scenarios of how Eisenstaedt got the photo. With a team of photo analysis experts, forensic anthropologists and facial recognition specialists, the final result reads like *Rashomon* in its comparisons of crucial discrepancies and conflicting memories. The authors deliver a convincing conclusion to their romantic detective tale about the last day of WWII and the photo that "savored what a long-sought peace feels like."

It's an understatement to say this Naval Institute book has "caught fire." *The Kissing Sailor* went into its fourth printing less than two months after its publication date, has been talked about on "The View" and "CBS in the Morning" and has been on the Amazon and Barnes and Noble best-seller lists. Why? It strikes a chord. †

To read Part II: The "Cosmic Forces" Behind How This Book Came to be Written, visit [usna.com](http://usna.com).

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