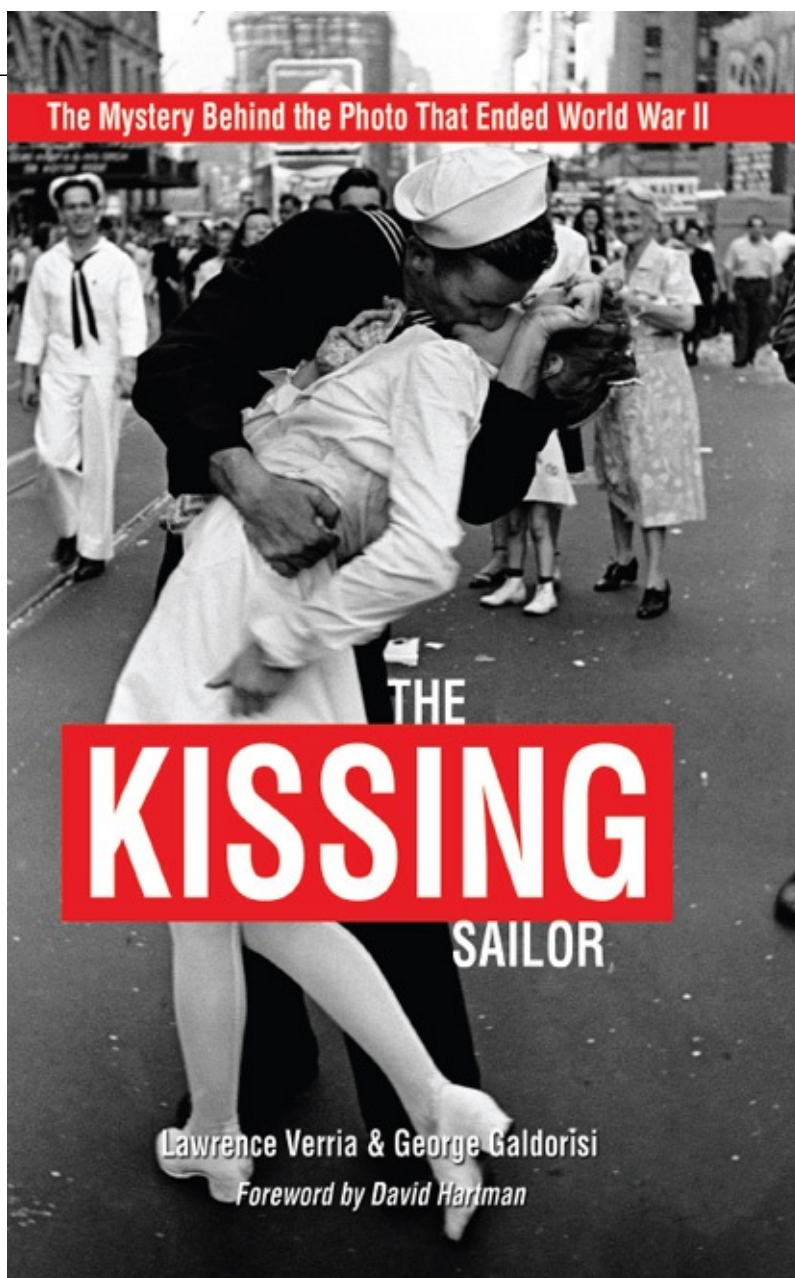


The Mystery Behind the Photo That Ended World War II



THE  
**KISSING**  
SAILOR

Lawrence Verria & George Galdorisi  
*Foreword by David Hartman*

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First printing

*To my wife, Celeste, and our daughters, Chelsea, Britney, and Simone, for encouraging a high school history teacher to give chase.*

Lawrence Verr

*This book is dedicated to my wife, Becky, and our adult son and daughter, Brian and Laura, for their infinite patience and understanding throughout all my writing pursuits and especially for their gentle encouragement in the process of producing this book.*

George Galdori

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# FOREWORD

A book? An entire *book*? About a black-and-white still photograph? Must be some picture! Indeed it's one of the most memorable and beloved photos ever taken, and this book about it is a masterful storytelling, a super detective story that solves a sixty-five-year-old mystery. Who were the sailor and nurse, in a passionate kiss, in *LIFE* magazine's photo taken in Times Square, New York City, on August 14, 1945, the day that World War II ended? What made this one photo worth not only a thousand words, but millions of words over decades? Because it makes us actually *feel* like we were there experiencing the exultation of the war's end with millions of others around America.

Who were the players in this tale? Three people from different worlds who had never met each other came together, purely by chance, for just a few seconds at 44th Street and Broadway at a historic moment in time. They were the great photographer, Alfred Eisenstaedt (Eisie), the Father of Photojournalism, who was on assignment for *LIFE* in Times Square trying to capture, on film, the wild emotions of that day; an American sailor who was on leave after two years serving on board ships in the Pacific War; and a young woman in a nurse's uniform who was on lunch break from her job in midtown Manhattan. She had strolled to Times Square to learn for herself what patients had been telling her all morning, that the war might be over.

World War II was the most widespread and destructive conflict in history. Fifty million to seventy million people died. Tens of millions more were injured, many for life. Every person and nation on the planet was affected in some way by the horrendous war. America was directly involved in combat for three years and nine months. It was the last time in America that every man, woman, and child, along with all business and government leaders, were totally committed to a common goal. The announcement that Japan had surrendered on August 14, 1945, unleashed a volcanic eruption of excitement not seen before or since—spontaneous parades, singing, dancing in the streets, and uninhibited hugging and kissing, including by total strangers. In New York City, Times Square is where people go to celebrate, then and now, and it was a magnet for New Yorkers who wanted to share their exhilaration that day. People by the tens of thousands poured into the Square from apartment buildings, offices, theaters, and restaurants. Booze was flowing at bars across the city, mostly for free. By seven that evening there were half a million people in Times Square. The world could breathe again. The war had finally ended. That day has been called “the happiest day in the history of America.”

The sailor and his very new girlfriend were spending his last day of leave going to the one-o'clock movie at Radio City Music Hall. Someone pounded on the theater door and yelled, “The war is over!” Radio City emptied. The couple left the theater, stopped at a bar and had a few quick drinks (at least *he* did), then headed into Times Square. Pandemonium broke out. In his joyous state, the sailor spotted a nurse in white, walked up to her and, without so much as saying “Hello,” grabbed her, bent her back and kissed her hard, her body shaking in submission. The girlfriend looked on. (It's a good sign that the sailor and his girlfriend have now been married for more than sixty years.)

From its first issue in 1936, *LIFE* was the most influential picture magazine in the country and had been telling the story of the war in all of its horror and emotion. Each week *LIFE* reached some seventy-five million reader-viewers with extraordinary photographs that made us laugh, cry, curse, and weep. In the magazine's forty-two-year life, Eisie photographed eighty-six of its cover images. When he arrived in Times Square that afternoon, the place was already coming unhinged. With his Leica 35mm camera, he spotted numerous targets of opportunity, including that sailor in a passionate

embrace and kiss. It lasted just a few seconds; the sailor and nurse parted, never introduced. Eisie took four pictures, then moved on quickly to find new “photo ops” without interviewing the couple learning their names.

That photo has allowed millions to “be there” in Times Square at that moment, to feel the emotion of that day in America. The sailor and nurse never saw the picture until 1980, thirty-five years after their chance meeting in Times Square. They did meet again, several times, over the next thirty years. Only now, more than sixty-five years after that photo was taken, have their identities been uncovered by a Rhode Island high school history teacher, Larry Verria, and a retired U.S. naval aviator, Captain George Galdorisi. Many pretenders came forward to say that *they* were in that photo, but Verria and Galdorisi’s ten years of sleuthing and master detective work have finally revealed, with certainty, what millions have wanted to know for decades. Who were and are the “sailor” and “nurse” in the iconic photo? Verria and Galdorisi’s investigative team included, among others, photo analysis experts, forensic anthropologists, facial recognition specialists, and cutting-edge techno-wizards from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Sherlock Holmes and Watson would applaud.

Oh! Who are the “sailor” and “nurse”? Continue, intrepid readers, and join detectives Verria and Galdorisi for a mystery solved and an emotional journey, a trip back in time to a few moments of joy and exultation in America.

*David Hartman*

**Note:** Hartman interviewed Eisenstaedt on network television in 1987. Eisie confirmed that neither *LIFE* nor *LIFE* knew the true identities of the sailor and nurse. Hartman met with the “real” sailor in Jamestown, Rhode Island, in October 2011.

David Hartman was the original, and for more than eleven years, host of *Good Morning America*. He writes and produces numerous programs about the history of military aviation and space, and has earned two national News and Documentary Emmys for writing, as well as the Aviation/Space Writers Association Journalism Award.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This book may never have been written if it were not for Anthony Restivo, a wisecracking student who always gravitated to the back of his U.S. history class. He knew the kissing sailor all along.

# INTRODUCTION

They were supposed to be dead. Enemy bullets wiped out the photographer's World War I regiment at Flanders. Nazis exterminated the Jewish woman's family in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Typhoon Cobra drowned the sailor's World War II mates in the Pacific Ocean. Despite forces that schemed to kill them all, somehow the German photographer, the Austrian Jew, and the American sailor lived to cross paths in Times Square, New York, on the day Japan surrendered to the United States.

On that V-J Day (Victory over Japan Day), in the nation's crossroads, the assertive sailor did not properly introduce himself to a woman he assumed to be a nurse. She did not invite his approach. None of that mattered. The Navy man swooped in and kissed her anyway. He held her tight for several seconds, as if not wanting to let a hard-earned victory slip away. Before he released her, many people surrounded the couple and took notice of the sailor's stylish caress and the nurse's flexible torso. One person in that crowd had a Leica camera hanging from his neck. Without conscious thought or second's hesitation, he lifted the camera to eye level and directed the lens at the entwined couple. His clicked the shutter closed four consecutive times. One of these pictures came to epitomize World War II's triumphant end.

For years people gazed at the V-J Day photo and marveled at what they saw. But they didn't all see the same thing. Many people were reminded of war and peace. Some imagined love or lust. Still others sensed relief and exhilaration. No matter how the photograph affected them, as time passed admirers grew increasingly curious about the sailor's and nurse's identities. For years no caption even mentioned either's name, and a decades-long mystery was the result. While many people tried to crack the case, most investigations concluded with something along the lines of, "I'm the sailor."

Adding to the kissers' anonymity, for sixty-three years the photographer's iconic picture went untitled. Though often referenced as "The Kiss," "The Sailor and the Nurse," or "The Kissing Sailor" not until 2008 did *LIFE: The Classic Collection* christen its aged offspring. The informal blessing amounted to, "Best to just call it, *V-J Day, 1945, Times Square*."<sup>1</sup> The unceremonious anointing did not extend to the photographed sailor and the woman dressed in white. Even after sixty-five years both remained nameless. *LIFE* never shared publicly who they thought might be their kissing sailor.

To be fair, executives at *LIFE* could argue persuasively they had no responsibility to tag the famous photograph's paramours. But their contention ignores the essence of the whole mission. Naming the sailor and nurse is not so much a line of reasoning, but rather a matter of soul. *LIFE* had an obligation to the historical record, as well as to the two national treasures in their cherished photo. It turned its back on both history and the photo's principals. Perhaps worse, it neglected its sacred mission. It was the magazine that promised to show the world. And almost always, it did that. But with *V-J Day, 1945, Times Square*, it lost sight of its charge. Instead of showing and sharing, for years it buried a story most worthy of the celebrated image.

In 1986, news anchor Ted Koppel unearthed and shared what he believed to be the long, lost account of *LIFE*'s famous photograph. In the documentary *45/85: America and the World since World War II*, Koppel proclaimed Marvin Kingsbury the kissing sailor. The segment's short clip shows Kingsbury pointing up to the news ticker in Times Square, declaring, "The Japs have surrendered. It flashed on there." Kingsbury then explained, "I met the girl coming across the street right here. I grabbed her, put my foot before her. Right down." Kingsbury's delivery convinced Koppel that the former sailor's claim rang true.

No doubt, thousands of Americans trusted the popular news commentator's declared opinion. Still, something about Kingsbury's story just didn't seem right. As Kingsbury demonstrated his technique for putting the nurse "right down," his mannerisms better suited a construction worker digging a ditch rather than a sailor embracing the woman in the famed celebratory hold and kiss. At best, his explanation of the lead-up emphasized the predictable. At worst, his rendition came across as a concocted story from more than forty years ago. *V-J Day, 1945, Times Square* deserved a better story.

As it turned out, Kingsbury had a lot of competition. Years earlier, many World War II sailors, Coast Guard seaman, two home-front nurses, and a dental assistant claimed key roles in the famous photograph. Their campaigns for recognition had turned contentious. Exchanges got ugly. Controversy brewed. And the battling had just begun. Later, more contenders entered the fray.

Most of the campaigning sailors and home-front women had convincing proof to back up their claims. But *LIFE* had the power. And without *LIFE*'s blessing, no kissing sailor or nurse could hope to win over the masses to their version of that V-J Day from so long ago. As the years passed, arguments in favor of one kissing sailor candidate over another succeeded only in knotting the mystery tighter. For more than sixty-five years the mystery remained, while *LIFE* watched.

The search for the kissing sailor is not an exclusive undertaking. Some of the forthcoming findings have existed for consideration for years. And most of the determinations unique to this book could have been discovered decades earlier. Well over a half century ago, a photographer and his Leica camera made plainly visible almost everything needed to make a positive identification of the kissing sailor and offer a convincing take on the nurse he kissed. All one had to do was look—really look—not just watch.

The kissing sailor and the woman dressed in white in Eisenstaedt's *V-J Day, 1945, Times Square* still walk among us. And while the scene they created appears so familiar to most, we know far too little. Against all the odds, and maybe with fate's forces at their backs, two strangers traversed the world's most popular square on the day history's most destructive war ended. Without rehearsal or intent, they communicated what the climax of a victorious war *felt* like. The particulars of that saga inspire the human spirit. Proof of their part in that iconic photo persuades the inquisitive. Treatment of their claims upsets the fair-minded. Forces beyond their control have denied them their due far too long. Their story, most worthy of the celebrated image, will finally be told.

# PART 1

## PRACTICALLY PICTURE-PERFECT

*The impulse to shoot is an instant reflex from the brain to the fingertip, bypassing the thinking stage. Often when you start to do that—think—it is too late, because thinking causes a tiny fraction of delay.*

ALFRED EISENSTAEDT

*Eisenstaedt's Guide to Photography*

## THE PHOTO

On Tuesday afternoon, August 14, 1945, Americans could practically taste the victory over the Japanese Empire. But that wasn't enough. They wanted to see it and never forget what it looked like. They needed a picture—one so sensational that those yet to be born could experience the same exhilaration and always remember what the end of World War II *felt* like.

While many newspapers and magazines hunted for such an image, the expectation of its publication far exceeded the others. Subscribers of that leading photo journal had come to expect captivating photographs, especially during World War II. Now, with victory in their grasp, the magazine's subscribers looked for a one-in-a-million photo to mark the occasion.

In pursuit of this image, the photo journal's most prominent photographer searched the streets of Times Square. He understood his charge. The magazine that employed him had earned a reputation for always getting *the* picture. So had he—and today his reputation was once again on the line. On that day, he looked for a picture that would epitomize the American victory.

Finding such an image grew increasingly challenging. As the early afternoon progressed, the nation's most famous square filled with celebrants. The photographer's field of vision narrowed. Keeping track of people's movements bordered on the impossible. Focusing on any one person proved especially futile. The noise of clacking feet, laughing voices, and escalating commotion added multiple layers of distraction. Despite the mounting obstacles, the photographer persisted in his search for *the* photo.

Suddenly, at the extremity of his peripheral vision, he noticed a tall sailor swooping in on a short woman dressed in white. Without conscious thought, he acted quickly. Spinning around, he raised his Leica camera and took a photo of what appeared to be a sailor and nurse kissing. He had taken thousands of pictures during his celebrated career. Many commanded the world's attention. None looked like this one. Ultimately, that photo came to epitomize the victorious end of World War II.

While in the future many would marvel at the sailor's and nurse's captured pose, in truth the shot required no posing or fussing. In fact, the photographer exercised no role in bringing the moment about. However, his contribution proved enormous. He acted impulsively, aimed accurately, and commanded that the camera's shutter close at the most poignant moment. The image he captured allows one to see the exhilaration, taste the kiss, smell the perfume and cologne, hear the bustle of the streets, and feel victory.

*V-J Day, 1945, Times Square* struck a powerful chord in 1945 and continued to play well with future onlookers years and even decades later. The photo grabs the viewer's attention and, like the pictured sailor, never seems to let go. All the photo's features compete for the eye's focus. The sailor's massive right hand cups the woman's waist and holds on tightly. She sways her left hip lazily. His left arm supports her upper torso, which might otherwise collapse toward Times Square pavement. Her right leg bends slightly upward, propped by a downward, pointed high-heeled white shoe. With their lips pressed tightly together and his nose compressing her left cheek, she closes her eyes, ostensibly content to remain unaware of her pursuer's identity. Their uniforms' colors, dark

navy blue and bleached white, offer the only contrast between their two melded bodies. The gathered around the victory celebrants focus attention on the captured moment. Grins and smiles indicate they approve. At last the conquering hero and his obliging maiden are together, safe and sound.

Over the ensuing years millions stared at or studied the anonymous sailor and nurse. Each viewer ignited their imagination. They devised story lines to complement what they saw, but they never knew the truth. Instead, like a 1940s movie, surmised plots glossed over the war's miseries and romanticized life in general. Predictably, the stories climaxed either with the couple parting and never speaking to each another again, but wondering what ever happened to each other, or the photo principals married, and hung Eisenstaedt's famous photograph in the living room of the Cape the bought after the war. And, of course, they spawned a boatload of children. While corny and cliché such scenarios sit well with a sentimental public.

Often people's fictional plots surrendered to fantasy. And who can blame them? The photograph brims with perceived unbridled passion and sexual tension. *V-J Day, 1945, Times Square* invites viewers to participate in the frolic. Many cannot resist the temptation.

Even without such enticement, other less readily observable considerations give people cause to stare at the photo longer. One might argue that Times Square's suspended instance marks the pinnacle of America's narrative. America defeated its demons, Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Emperor Hirohito and the Japanese military. A victor nation celebrates gleefully. Prosperity, security, and confidence await the entwined couple. There will be marriages and a baby boom, creating a common experience that continues to characterize America's preferred vision of itself. *V-J Day, 1945, Times Square* marks the starting line of a sprint toward a more prosperous standard of living and a inventive ideal family life. One can assume the sailor and nurse will go on to purchase a split-level home, live in suburbia, drive big cars, watch television shows, and produce children—lots of children. Life will be good. No one foresees the Korean or Vietnam conflicts, the civil rights struggle, Watergate, terrorist attacks, or today's concerns of "America's decline." Nothing distracts us from the bliss. In fact, in that moment, everybody longs to *be* an American. And on this glorious day, at this precious moment, regardless of their birth nation, everyone waves the Red, White, and Blue.

Though most photographs fade with the passing years, the black-and-white photo of a sailor and nurse kissing on V-J Day sharpens and raises its voice. Taken in the planet's most popular meeting place and printed in the magazine known around the world for its captivating photographs, the image reminds us of a time when we felt better as a nation and as individuals than we ever had before and will ever have since. Like a fond memory, no one wants to turn away. And for more than sixty-five years almost no one did.



## THE PLACE WHERE PEOPLE MEET

Just the mention of its name conjures imagery of glaring lights, crowded streets, huge billboards, and outrageous scenes. People from around the world can speak to the location with so much familiarity that one might think the place exists no farther away than their backyard. The area is so well known that no matter how people reference the location, everyone knows of where they speak. *The nation's square*, *the crossroads of the world*, and *the meeting place* all call attention to the same prized real estate—Times Square. And through the years, whether cheering to celebrate the end of a long world war, bundling up to watch a lighted ball drop from a skyscraper on a frigid night, or peeping at a peep show in the early morning hours, people rush to Times Square to see and give witness.

Despite its historic standing in the nation's psyche, Times Square's fabled past runs just over one century. Fewer than five decades before a sailor kissed a nurse on V-J Day, and a few years prior to the time when Times Square's first multicolored lights glittered, people met at Longacre Square. Outlined more in the shape of a woman's accented figure than a square, Longacre enticed patrons to New York City's 7th Avenue and Broadway intersection. Though in the 1800s visitors typically met at stalls and talked about horses, as the nearby theater district's lights shone closer, the venue and topic of conversation changed. By the late 1800s the area's country feel could only be found farther north. The urbanization took on greater momentum in 1902 when the *New York Times* set up shop at the intersection of 7th Avenue and 42nd Street.

The *New York Times* constructed its new building, the Times Building, on a triangular landmark that looked over the square. The newspaper's executives chose the location wisely. Not only did the *New York Times*, 375-foot-high tower look over the entire square, but in 1904 the world's second tallest building sat directly over the city's newly constructed 42nd Street subway station. That station proved to be the busiest hub in New York's underground transportation system. From that time forward, the 42nd Street subway exit funneled people from all points of origin and every walk of life into Times Square.

In 1904 the area's new inhabitant petitioned for a name change. They succeeded. Longacre became Times Square. The paper that printed "All the News That's Fit to Print" wasted no time making the square the nation's most important civic meeting place. As early as 1904, the Times Tower's powerful searchlight signaled Theodore Roosevelt's election to the presidency. The spectacle drew a fascinated audience. The stream of light from atop the building could be seen for at least thirty miles.<sup>1</sup> That light show, impressive for its time, would prove primitive compared to what was ahead.

While no sole source can be credited for the dazzling light spectacle that came to epitomize the area, Oscar J. Gude, a German-born entrepreneur, might account more than any other individual for the sea of brightly lit advertising signs. Gude saw Times Square's phenomenal advertising potential soon after first surveying the locale.<sup>2</sup> Not only did the area draw increasing numbers of businessmen and visitors, but its low roofs and wide-open spaces created a visual bonanza.<sup>3</sup> In 1904, his first sign for Trimble Whiskey proved an overwhelming success. Propped at 47th Street, right before Broadway

and 7th Avenue intersected, its moving light forms amazed Times Square's pedestrians. Other companies soon approached Gude to enlist his services. By 1912 his signs dominated the Times Square nightscape.<sup>4</sup> Advertisements that blinked, imitated movement, and spilled beyond rectangular confines commanded attention. Soon the lit billboards of Times Square competed with the Statue of Liberty and other city attractions for the tourist's eye.<sup>5</sup>

Through 1945 Times Square's fame and popularity grew, undaunted by those who questioned the area's moral standing, or lack thereof. Over the years live theater, vaudeville acts, and movie houses took turns beckoning crowds to the square. Some motion pictures even advertised Times Square to the nation. In 1942, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* featured James Cagney singing "Give My Regards to Broadway." Cagney won an Academy Award for his performance. Thousands followed the Oscar-winning actor's example and made the pilgrimage to pay their respects to the street that ran through the world's most recognized intersection.

Three years after the Times Building dropped its first lighted ball on New Year's Eve, the *New York Times* added another reason to gather in *the* square. In 1910 they provided round-by-round bulletins of the Jim Jeffries–Jack Johnson boxing match. The fight's reporting drew about 30,000 interested followers to the 42nd Street end of Times Square. People liked this immediacy of learning about the news in real time. The news agency took note and built on that notion. In 1919 they constructed an electric scoreboard to report in real time the Cincinnati Reds–Chicago White Sox World Series games. On October 2, 1919, as Belgium's King Albert I and Queen Elizabeth arrived in New York, men and boys in black and grey top hats and caps congregated around the Times Building to watch play-by-play bulletins.<sup>6</sup> In 1928 the instant reporting of news took on greater permanency. That year the *Times* invested in an electric board that flashed the news in moving type around the building's perimeter. The scroll—variously called a news ticker, ribbon, or zipper—became a fixture around the Times building, where for fifty years people gathered to learn about the world beyond the nation's square.

People continued to gather in Times Square despite developments that could have potentially curbed such behavior. In 1937 Americans spent \$900 million on radios. As a result, many thought people would stay home on New Year's Eve rather than trudge out in the cold to witness another dropping of the ball in Times Square. The odds-setters were in error. Like years before and those to follow, people mobbed the nation's crossroads.

While the day's news often drew people to the intersection of Broadway and 7th Avenue, Times Square's greatest attraction had nothing to do with headlines. More than anything else, the area's frenetic and dazzling light show lured visitors. Continuing the tradition of the square's theater entrances on The Great White Way, storefront signs and advertising billboards lit the area with a spectacular, colorized glare. Prior to World War II, signs such as the Bond clothing store's large neon lettering stood out as recognizable landmarks. Throughout Times Square, visitors of all ages gaped at the carnival of lights and special effects. The manifestations never got old, and never remained exactly the same. As early as 1906, atop the Knickerbocker Hotel, advertisers erected electric spectacles that drew world attention.<sup>7</sup> From 1916 to 1921, lower energy costs and new technology encouraged Times Square businesses to install bigger and higher-wattage signs.<sup>8</sup> In 1933, visitors to the nation's meeting place came to see Douglas Leigh's enormous, *steaming* cup of A&P coffee. In 1942 Leigh added the Camel man, puffing cigarette smoke rings.

Up until World War II the light show grew larger and brighter. However, in the early 1940s, the war's effect on the home front extended to Times Square. During those years the square's luminosity

dimmed. Defense necessitated the darkening. Even miles out at sea, Times Square's glow outlined ships against the skyline. The background light made American Navy ships easier targets for German submarines. After the sinking of several Navy ships, in April 1942 the U.S. government ordered the lights above street level turned off in Times Square for most of the war.<sup>9</sup> Even the *Times* ribbon had sit still and dark until 1945.

But the dimmed skyline did not deter crowds from gathering in the world's meeting place during the early 1940s. In fact, just the opposite occurred. In a similar fashion to what happened during World War I, people flocked to Times Square during World War II. Throughout the war Times Square was the center of the world's most popular liberty port.<sup>10</sup> New York's vast harbor, the Brooklyn Navy Yard (the nation's largest),<sup>11</sup> and military training posts along the Northeast coast provided an ever-replenishing source of servicemen. And whether they anticipated their fighting days apprehensively or enjoyed their long-delayed and deserved leave, Times Square's free public shows, often attended by celebrities to sell war bonds, created an irresistible attraction. In 1944 approximately 25,000 screaming fans stormed the Paramount Theater to see Frank Sinatra.<sup>12</sup> Other excited visitors during that same year came to see movies such as, *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*. During the war, Times Square gained a reputation as a B-movie paradise.<sup>13</sup> In the warehouse of attractions, no single drama stood out among others. As one visiting soldier's *New York Post* itinerary testified, the nation's square brimmed with a litany of enticements: "I'll go to Times Square and stand there practically all day smelling the frankfurters and breathing in the cold air from all those air-conditioned movie houses. And one of the things I want to do is yoo hoo at every pretty girl who passes by."<sup>14</sup> Rather than declining, Times Square's crowds rose to unprecedented levels during the war years.<sup>15</sup>

While the growth in servicemen traffic created a local economic boom in New York, arriving sailors and soldiers taxed business facilities. To meet the demand, 200 military service centers of one kind or another sprang up to feed or otherwise meet the needs of the 93,700 servicemen and women who circulated through New York every week.<sup>16</sup> In Times Square, sailors dropped into the Pepsi Cola Service Center to shave, shower, or write letters. New York became a home away from home for many servicemen.<sup>17</sup>

During the war, Times Square functioned as the thumping heart of the nation's war bond drive. In fact, in 1943 Times Square was temporarily renamed "Bondway" to promote war bond drives. Government-sponsored radio broadcasts from Times Square encouraged war bond sales and metal scrap drives. In 1944 President Franklin Roosevelt lighted a six-floor-high Statue of Liberty replica that sat on an oversized cash register, located about a hundred feet from the 42nd Street subway entrance. For the seventh war bond drive, a statue depicting the famous flag-raising photo at Iwo Jima was erected in front of the 43rd Street war bond station. That famous scene stood proudly in front of Childs Restaurant until after the war ended.

On August 14, 1945, what turned out to be the last day of World War II, Times Square anticipated good news. Business owners, residents, and visitors readied for the biggest celebration in the square's history. New York had lifted the restrictions on lights. The *Times* ribbon, again operational, informed onlookers of the day's news. Activity at the crossroads carried on briskly. Handsome servicemen and pretty girls filled the streets. Shows and spectacles invited every passerby to have a look. As the day progressed, anticipation of the war's end built. Holding back became increasingly difficult. With Japan's imminent surrender still unannounced, New Yorkers and visitors in Times Square wanted to let loose. They waited anxiously for word of victory.

That day, postcards for sale in many of the square's stores depicted the area's past and hinted at its

future. Most shone brilliantly and colorfully, but none captured the square's infectious spirit and effervescent soul. They couldn't. Up to that moment, no image taken in Times Square could make the heart race. There was, as of yet, no defining kiss.

## THE PUBLICATION

Time, Inc., founder Henry Luce had an idea for a new magazine. From his office, a short walk from New York's Times Square, it occurred to him that photos printed on large pages could tell stories as well as, maybe even better than, words. Rather than read, subscribers could watch, witness, and wonder. Of course, by the 1930s other magazines had already upped the number of photographs on their pages, but Luce intended to take the concept to a new level.

He thought some more and conferred with others about his ideas for the new publication. In 1930 he articulated his vision: "To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things . . . the women that men love and marry; children; to see and take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed; thus to see and to be shown is now the will and new expectancy of mankind."<sup>1</sup> Luce's brainchild, *LIFE* magazine "The Show-Book of the World," freed their photographers to pursue and picture subjects as they found them. Loosely composed directions and a few editors' notes made up the full complement of directions for *LIFE*'s cameramen.<sup>2</sup> Uninhibited, photographers could surprise, even shock, the viewer.<sup>3</sup> Just like life itself, the new magazine strove to be varied, unpredictable, and adventurous.

Of course, in addition to publishing pictures, *LIFE* printed letters. But photos always eclipsed words. During the magazine's weekly layout sessions, *LIFE* editors first spread out and arranged numerous pictures, and then added words sparingly.<sup>4</sup> *LIFE* introduced the photo essay to American magazines. Pictures told the story. Words clarified the meaning. And usually just a few words sufficed.

In some respects the magazine's images printed bigger than life, or at least larger than anything appearing on the pages of other publications. Most other magazines had miniature images on noticeably smaller pages. Newspapers turned out a few grainy pictures on pulp newspaper stock. To publish more photos proved cost prohibitive. Consequently, text continued its dominance of most publications—but not *LIFE*.

Several factors converged to fertilize *LIFE*'s propagation of the visual. For one, technological innovations supported the production of more photos. Roll film replaced photographic plates, freeing photographers from laborious preparations and transitions.<sup>5</sup> The new film formats enabled the widespread use of modern, small-format cameras like the Leica, which could take pictures in rapid sequence. By 1936 *LIFE* was able to print more pictures more economically by developing cheaper forms of coated stock.<sup>6</sup> With Time, Inc.'s advanced distribution capabilities and ongoing improvements in transportation, more photos could be dispersed to more subscribers.

But paper, technology, and cost factors don't take pictures. Photographers do. And *LIFE* hired the world's best. In the early years the new hires included Margaret Bourke-White, Peter Stackpole, and Alfred Eisenstaedt. Later, *LIFE* photographer giants included Rex Hardy, Gordon Parks, Bill Eppridge, and Larry Burrows, among numerous others. Collectively, their portfolios chronicle the world's history from the 1930s through the 1970s.

Luce introduced *Time* magazine's new sister on November 23, 1936. Even at conception the



siblings acted differently. “LIFE was more fun.”<sup>7</sup> And their father knew it. Pictures in black and white or in color invited interpretation. Rather than producing posed and stoic portraits, *LIFE* photographers sought individuals where they labored, loved, and lived. Often they did so without the subject’s knowledge. To create a natural feel in their pictures, *LIFE* photographers got out of the way. They climbed trees and poles, mixed in with the subject’s peers, or became lost in large crowds. Only the pictures mattered—and, of course, people’s responses to those images.

Margaret Bourke-White’s picture of a dam under construction at Fort Peck, Montana, graced *LIFE*’s first cover. A picture on the inside cover showed an anonymous child’s birth, with the caption “Life Begins.” It would not be the last time *LIFE* printed a picture of an unidentified person.

Considering the magazine sold out of all its 250,000 newsstand copies on the first day,<sup>8</sup> and commanded an overriding presence throughout the midcentury, one might assume *LIFE* cornered the market for photo journals. It did not. Many other publications competed for the public’s viewing eye. In Europe, the French *Vu*, the German *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, and the British *Weekly Illustrated* captivated the public. In the United States, rivals included *National Geographic*, *Vanity Fair*, *Collier’s*, *Liberty*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Look*. In this competitive market, not everyone read, looked, or bought *LIFE*. In fact, only one out of every four Americans “read” *LIFE* regularly.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers and some magazines had greater circulation and a more diverse readership than *LIFE*. Those who did subscribe to *LIFE* typically stood on the upper rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.<sup>10</sup> The farmer in Montana with dirty fingernails or the fisherman in Rhode Island with sunburned knuckles were less likely to pick up *LIFE* than the dentist who handled sterilized instruments in Chicago or New York.

But number crunching can mislead. Much of *LIFE*’s draw, success, and impact defied direct quantification. A single photograph can influence a viewer far more than a “formula driven” newspaper piece.<sup>11</sup> While more people might have viewed other media sources, those daily papers and periodicals would be hard, pressed to match *LIFE*’s eternal imprint on the events and times they depicted. Further, *LIFE* had a greater “pass-along factor” than other publications.<sup>12</sup> After a customer finished his *LIFE*, he typically didn’t throw it away. Instead, a neighbor or a colleague was given a look. One market survey estimated that each copy of *LIFE* was seen by seventeen people.<sup>13</sup> By 1950, at its peak, *LIFE*’s pass-along factor numbered seventy-five million or more.<sup>14</sup> Also, though not everyone subscribed to *LIFE*, those who did—lawyers, politicians, and educators—enjoyed considerable influence. Given their professions, they were likely to share what they saw with many people. *LIFE* subscribers often opened conversations with, “Did you see that picture in *LIFE*?” Further still, the *keeper factor* enhanced *LIFE*’s standing among other publications. Unlike newspaper people did not throw out their *LIFE* magazines at the end of every week. Even forty years after the last *LIFE* entered circulation, the photo journal continues to sell on eBay, in yard sales, and in consignment shops. Many continue to collect *LIFE* magazines. All these factors demonstrate *LIFE*’s reach stretched far beyond its subscription rates, which numbered respectably in the millions nationwide.

Those who viewed *LIFE*’s pictures did not always see the pictures the same way. Their vantage point determined their interpretation. Sometimes they spied the photo as if from behind a distant window with no connection to the subject. Such viewings tended to amuse. At other times, up close the subscriber saw hauntingly familiar images. And at special times, a published still photo conveyed motion and froze the viewer. Though rare, those printed pages caused the spectator to *feel*. And whether he laughed, wept, cursed, or just gazed, he never forgot what he saw. For thirty-six years and through 1,864 consecutive issues, purchasers turned *LIFE*’s pages in search of such images.

As early as the Great Depression, *LIFE* established an “iconic presence and cultural prestige.” The “Show-Book of the World” stitched itself into the fabric of the times it photographed. *LIFE* fortified that standing during World War II. During that war the photo journal’s willing cooperation with the national government’s war efforts, including censorship, bordered on collaboration. Ten days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Henry Luce communicated to President Roosevelt, “In the days to come—far beyond strict compliance with whatever rules may be laid down for us by the necessities of war—we can think of no greater happiness than to be of service to any branch of our government and to its armed forces. For the dearest wish of all of us is to tell the story of absolute victory under your leadership.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, *LIFE* obliged the Office of War Information’s prohibition of published pictures of American war dead until 1943. Afterward, they agreed to show dead Americans (but not their faces) to help jump-start the waning war bond drive.<sup>17</sup>

Cooperation with the government proved good for business at *LIFE*. During World War II the magazine’s circulation boomed. One might say, “World War II was made for *LIFE*.”<sup>18</sup> At the very least, they enjoyed a fruitful marriage. During the war, *LIFE* became the era’s most important picture magazine.<sup>19</sup> Many of the publication’s photographs depicted women—mothers, wives, and girlfriends—waiting anxiously for their courageous men to return from war. Interspersed with patriotic photographs, stories, and advertisements, the propaganda heightened the anticipation of the soldiers and sailors’ return to America. As 1945 progressed, many imagined what that reunion might *feel* like.

Of course, in addition to propaganda and patriotism, *LIFE* photographed the most upsetting aspects of war, producing images that affected people deeply. In 1995 Frederick Ivor-Campbell of Warren, Rhode Island, attributed his “lifelong abhorrence of cruelty and violence” to his “early exposure” to *LIFE*’s published photographs of the Bataan Death March fifty years earlier.<sup>20</sup> Another viewer, Gordon Liddy, credited *LIFE*’s full-page photo of three dead American soldiers on the beach at Buna, New Guinea, printed in September 1943, for “hardening the wartime resolve of the American people.”<sup>21</sup> *LIFE*’s World War II photos informed and affected people’s remembrances of the era.

During the postwar period, which commenced on August 14, 1945, *LIFE*’s reach lengthened further still. The published pictures of the era chronicled the political, sports, and entertainment worlds, and the American family’s backyards. According to John Loengard, a former *LIFE* photographer, “By 1960 it seemed that almost everyone had been photographed by *LIFE* at least once. Anyone at the time might know somebody who knew somebody else—whose face had actually appeared in the magazine.”<sup>22</sup> And so it was.

Arguably, *LIFE* sometimes went over the top to get *everyone*’s picture. In one particularly controversial piece, *LIFE* instructed wives how to undress in front of their husbands. And, yes, of course, pictures told the story. Another, interestingly, less-upsetting feature for *LIFE* readers celebrated the power of the A-bomb and warned of the dangerous new world that lay ahead. Between photo essays on women undressing and bombs dropping, *LIFE* sold Cadillac cars, Camel cigarettes, and Coca-Cola. Like the magazine’s stories, the advertisements enticed viewers with pictures.

It seemed *LIFE* appeared everywhere, but not forever. By the time John F. Kennedy became president the media market had changed. Instead of subjects wondering, “Will the picture be in next week?” they were increasingly more interested in knowing, “Will we be on at 5 or 11?”<sup>23</sup> By 1960 television established itself in households across the United States. The magazine market, later to be followed by the newspaper beat, lost subscribers. But *LIFE* went down swinging. Remaining more popular than many of its competitors, *LIFE* never succumbed to TV. When *LIFE* ceased weekly publication in 1972, the magazine bowed to niche publication markets, not the boob tube.<sup>24</sup> But,

course, the passing of the thirty-six-year-old publication giant gave cause for sad reflection. At the news conference announcing the end, Andrew Heiskell, *LIFE*'s chairman of the board, fought tears and offered, "I'm only sad that with such a record of achievement *LIFE* should have such a short life."<sup>25</sup>

During the years that followed, efforts to resurrect *LIFE* paid the former publication the ultimate compliment. In 1978 the photo journal reappeared as a smaller-sized monthly magazine, which ran through March 2000. Later, *LIFE* reappeared as a newspaper insert. Over the years, Time Life published special-edition magazines and books. Many of those publications reprinted older photos from *LIFE* magazine. Some of those photographs reappeared often. One photo of a sailor kissing a nurse at the end of World War II graced the pages of those publications more than any other. Most recently, starting in March 2009, *LIFE* published a large interactive website, hosted and promoted by Google. Once again, the publication remains all about the pictures.

But *LIFE* as Americans once knew it no longer exists. Even though no one wanted the old publication to go, even *LIFE* can't be raised from the dead. So remembering must do. Thanks to old copies stored in people's attics, and pictures that are republished to this day, we can still see what Henry Luce envisioned almost a century ago. And whether the image captures children watching a puppet show, a marching band leader kicking up his leg with an impromptu parade behind him, or a sailor kissing a "nurse" on the day World War II ended, because of *LIFE* we can always visit a time and place preserved forever by a sharp-eyed photographer.



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