



War and peace

By John-Michael O'Sullivan

The photography of Tony Vaccaro



OPPOSITE: TONY VACCARO, PHOTOGRAPHED BY HIS SON, FRANK, IN THE GARDEN OF THEIR HOME IN QUEENS, NEW YORK, 1986. ABOVE: 'WHITE DEATH', VACCARO'S FAMED PHOTO OF THE BODY OF HIS FRIEND, HENRY TANNENBAUM, WAS TAKEN IN EASTERN BELGIUM IN JANUARY 1945

In the spring of 1944, a young man from Brooklyn called Henry Tannenbaum was drafted into the US Army. By summer, he had landed at Omaha Beach in Normandy with the 83rd Division's 331st Infantry Regiment. Through autumn, it advanced across northern France and Luxembourg, towards the German border and the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes in December. On 11 January 1945, Tannenbaum and his platoon were ambushed during an advance in a field in eastern Belgium. Their sergeant escaped by playing dead, watching as German SS troopers shot the wounded Americans one by one, stripping them of valuables and then driving panzers over their corpses.

That night, snow fell. The following morning, when the sergeant returned to the field with one of his sentries, the dead were already disappearing beneath drifts of white powder. Most had been crunched beyond recognition by the German tank treads. But one soldier, shot from behind, lay just where he'd fallen, face forward. The sentry took a photograph of the body with the camera he always wore around his neck. Against the new snow, it was a series of mounds of steel and leather and waterlogged cloth; rifle dropped, boots tilted out of the ground, backpack still strapped in place, a steel helmet lolling at an

unnatural angle. It wasn't until the body was turned over that the sentry recognised it as Tannenbaum, one of his closest friends.

The shot was just one of thousands Private Michelantonio Celestino Onofrio Vaccaro took during those months of conflict. A keen amateur photographer, the 21-year-old was deemed too young to join the army's camera-wielding Signal Corps when he was called up, yet old enough, he angrily points out 70 years on, to kill. But Vaccaro defied orders, smuggling his handheld Argus C3 across the Atlantic and into action.

While official photographers documented the horrors of war from a distance – streets lined with sandbags, buildings flattened, marching lines of faceless men – Vaccaro's images tell a more personal story. There are secret shots of the Normandy invasion beaches, snapped through a hole in his raincoat; pictures of GIs abroad, flirting with local girls or sitting bored in their tents during the long, uneasy weeks of waiting to be ordered up to the front. Then there's a shift, to Belgian and German forests, tall trees and anxious eyes peering out of foxholes. And then come the explosive moments when the killing started. Soldiers racing past Vaccaro, faces stretched in fear and horror, and incredulity that a comrade was pointing a camera, rather than running for his life. →

OPPOSITE: A US ARMY PRIVATE FIRST CLASS NAMED BRODIE AT EASE IN SAINTE-MÈRE-ÉGLISE, FRANCE, TWO WEEKS AFTER THE NORMANDY LANDINGS, JUNE 1944

There are shots of dead enemies, trampled into the mud, pictures of their loved ones scattered around like confetti. And there are shots of comrades like James Fair, a 28-year-old bookkeeper from North Dakota, half-buried beneath tank treads, his limbs strangled with mud, stones and debris. Or Jack Rose, a Tennessee labourer, who promised his family he'd come back from the war even if he had to swim home: Vaccaro's photo fixes him mid-air, drawing one last breath as enemy sniper fire rips into his body. And then there's "White Death", the photograph of Tannenbaum's snow-shrouded corpse, the image that would change the course of Tony Vaccaro's life.



It snows again, the night before I visit Vaccaro in New York. The next morning, it covers the parapets of the Queensboro Bridge, and drifts down in clouds from the overhead rail tracks crisscrossing Long Island City. High off in the distance, across the East River, Manhattan looks like a dream in the pale, early light. But when I get to his studio, a large L-shaped space on the top floor of a converted factory, Vaccaro is already hard at work.

Long Island is his world now. It has been decades since he sold the Upper West Side penthouse where he lived and worked during his time as one of the world's most in-demand photojournalists. But since he agreed to let his children start organising and digitising his archive, Vaccaro goes to the new studio most days. He lives with his son's family nearby, a few blocks towards the river. Round the corner, there's a neighbourhood Italian restaurant where the walls are lined with his back catalogue: Ali MacGraw, dangling a flower in front of her face; Hubert de Givenchy, bounding out of a car; Georgia O'Keeffe, giving the camera a sly glance through a slice of cheese; a pre-inauguration JFK, fidgeting in his Georgetown home; Pablo Picasso in glowering close-up.

"I go to Manhattan anytime I need to go," Vaccaro shrugs, glancing at one of the pictures near his desk, an old selfie with Central Park stretching away in the distance, taken from the penthouse's spectacular terrace. "At one time I used to go there a lot."

Vaccaro used to go everywhere a lot. As a photographer-for-hire, he ricocheted around the world on commissions for some of the biggest magazines of his era – publications read by millions all over the world – from *Newsweek* to *Life* and *Look*.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1922, he moved back to his parents' southern Italian hometown as a toddler. "We didn't move," he interjects, correcting himself. "The mafia wanted my father to get out of his job. And the mafia took his job, and the 60 people that my father was over – his job was to keep all the roads in Greensburg in tip-top shape. They said, 'If you don't get outta here, we'll kill you.' So he and my mother ran away. They were risking that I would be kidnapped and God knows what else. So, that's what happened there."

The family travelled back across the Atlantic, from Pennsylvania's coal-mining heartland to the remote Italian hill town of Bonefro. In the

space of a few years, both parents were dead, and their American son had become a farmboy, adopted by an uncle who treated him badly, but who also showed him the importance of timing. "He was a great hunter. It was through him I learned how to shoot," Vaccaro recalls. "He would see an animal, and he would go [quickly] like this: bang. And the animal would fall. That's how I take pictures. A little longer, and there is no picture any more. People change their expression: even if they're crying, they stop and smile. The real photographer must take that first picture."

With Benito Mussolini in power in fascist Italy, the teenage Vaccaro and his sisters returned to America at the outbreak of WWII to live with relatives in New Rochelle, New York. He's never fully left his second home behind, though, and for most of his career he commuted between Manhattan and Rome. He still speaks in sentences constructed with exquisite Italian formality: "land where they play golf" instead of golf course; "the sister of my mother" instead of aunt, and so forth. He settled back into American life and into the local high school, where a camera club organised by one of his teachers set him on his way.

"I really owe all this to Mr Lewis," Vaccaro says, waving his hands at the studio's print-covered walls. "I'd wanted to become a tailor back then, I was fascinated by it. I'd wanted to be a sculptor, too, you know, many things. You know, when I did this thing of Lincoln here" – gesturing towards a small bronze bust on his desk – "to show him [Lewis] that I wanted to become a sculptor, he looked at me and said, 'Tony, don't you ever forget this; you are a born photographer.'"

Mr Lewis's words stayed with Vaccaro. They got him through the horror of conflict, all those months when he snapped pictures by day and developed them in the dark of night, using borrowed helmets and chemicals scavenged from bombed-out shops. The first batches, posted back to his sisters in New Rochelle, never made it past military censors. Many others were ruined by sun or rain. But Vaccaro kept the majority of the negatives safe, wound onto a movie spool, wrapped in cellophane and tucked into his backpack.

When WWII ended, he stayed on in Europe and carried on shooting: the defeated, resentful faces of German PoWs, frightened refugees, civilians acting out some semblance of normal life in the midst of bomb-flattened cities. He saw Mussolini's body dangling from a girder in a Milanese piazza, and Hitler's dried blood in his Berlin bunker – one of the few moments in the war Vaccaro wouldn't, or couldn't, photograph.

But eventually he went back to America, where a newspaper profile on Fleur Cowles, the editor behind the popularity of pictorial magazine *Look* – and, later, the legendary (and ruinously expensive thus short-lived) *Flair* – inspired him to apply for a job. Cowles was entranced by his work. "Once she saw this picture," Vaccaro says, pointing to Tannenbaum's body, "she saw *Flair*. She said, 'Can you take fashion pictures that look like this?' She was super. She adored me. She treated me with white gloves. 'Anything you want, Tony.'"

A photograph of the formidable Cowles hangs in pride of place on one of the studio walls, part of a hall of fame that also includes Leonard Cohen, Jackson Pollock, Ursula Andress, General George S Patton, →







PREVIOUS PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JFK AT HOME IN GEORGETOWN, WASHINGTON DC, 1960;
 GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, NEW MEXICO, 1960; PABLO PICASSO, MOUGINS, SOUTH OF FRANCE, 1966.
 OPPOSITE: ALI MACGRAW IN A NEW YORK HOTEL, 1971

Enzo Ferrari and Peter Sellers. Vaccaro's closeness to his subjects soon became his trademark, just as it had in his war work. He seems to have spent his career only inches away from the action, the legacy of a time that was less controlled and filtered than our own, when a camera and a press pass granted access into the private lives of presidents, celebrities and royalty.

Vaccaro got close enough to catch Stirling Moss's glum fury at Monza, moments after he'd crashed out of one of the biggest races of his career, close enough to the immaculately suited Shah of Iran to see the glint of the pistol in his hand, close enough to a young Richard Nixon, at home, catching the moment when one of the 20th-century's most vilified politicians softened into his daughter's embrace.

Even without invoking journalistic privileges, Vaccaro seemed to have a knack for finding himself in the right place at the right time. He became friends with Marcel Marceau while eating sandwiches on a park bench in Paris, and bumped into Dmitri Shostakovich in a train station in the middle of the Berlin blockade. A commission to photograph Pablo Picasso would evolve into Jean Renoir hitching a lift to the Côté d'Azur in Vaccaro's Alfa Romeo. He became a close friend of Italian film icon Marcello Mastroianni, and mingled effortlessly with European high society.

"You see?" he says proudly, pointing to a picture where he's posing alongside an Italian count. "I always dressed perfectly." (Except, perhaps, for the time when Sophia Loren showed up early for their first shoot together, at his penthouse. Vaccaro was still in the shower, and answered the door in a towel. "Tony Vaccaro!" Loren greeted him, unflustered and amused. "*Sempre pronto!*" "Always ready!")

"He did my favourite picture that was ever taken," recalls Ali MacGraw of her session with Vaccaro, "for *Look* magazine, just before *Love Story* came out. It was a bizarre moment in my life. I was about five minutes away from having a baby. We had this film that was about to come out, and we were being photographed for everything, not that anyone knew the film was going to be anything at that stage.

"He came into my hotel suite early one morning; at least, it was early for my husband, Bob, who was head of Paramount. Tony came in with a bunch of violets, which you just don't see in America, that little Eliza Dolittle touch. I liked him immediately. He was so unpretentious, there was none of that terrible fashion gas. I sat there and it was done in a flash, but I remember being aware that I had met a lovely gentleman. He had such charm and such humility. I don't have pictures of myself in my home. I've never liked having my picture taken, actually. But Tony's is different. It doesn't even matter that it's me; it's to do with this wonderful artist, who saw that girl, and those colours, and that moment."



Tony Vaccaro is a hard subject to interview. Not at all uncommunicative or disinterested: simply a man who's lived with all his stories for many decades, and who, at 95, finds himself in the midst of an unexpected

renaissance. He's had a rush of exhibitions in the past few years alongside two documentaries: the Emmy-nominated *Underfire: the Untold Story of Pfc Tony Vaccaro*, on his war work; and an upcoming film by director Andrew Davis on his decades-long friendship with fellow Italian-American photographer, Santi Visalli.

"It's such a moving story," says Davis, known for action blockbusters such as *The Fugitive* and *Under Siege*. "We thought, we have to do this while these guys are still here."

Vaccaro is still a walking advertisement for Italian elegance, a trim figure in a sweater, shirt and neatly knotted tie. The slim red thread sewn onto his jacket lapel acknowledges the Légion d'Honneur medal François Mitterrand presented to him on the 50th anniversary of the French Liberation, on top of the deluge of industry and civic honours he's racked up over the decades. More recently, a square was named after him in Brittany's Saint-Briac-sur-Mer, one of the French towns he helped liberate. US Secretary of State John Kerry attended the ceremony.

Then there's the Tony Vaccaro Museum, in Bonefro, Italy, opened in 2014 in tribute to the town's most famous son. Naturally, there's now an Instagram account, where Vaccaro shares the stories behind his pictures, and records the studio's many visitors (including, recently, actors Emily Mortimer and Alessandro Nivola, picking up a photo Vaccaro took of Nivola's sculptor grandfather).

But none of these is Vaccaro's primary concern. "My website? I don't know anything about that," he shrugs, ransacking the studio to find tucked-away treasures to show off, like the camera bag he travelled with for most of his career, a sturdy leather Perrin Contur satchel, in which he'd stash shirts and underwear alongside the Leica he upgraded to after WWII. As he passes the large monitor where one of the studio team sits restoring old images, he rattles off dangling, fragmentary anecdotes.

"This is the day before landing in Normandy. The beaches are still under the Germans, here. And this one is [Minoru] Yamasaki, who built the World Trade Center. And this is Kennedy. I told him that his middle name was Italian – he loved it! And this is the Countess Consuelo Crespi. This is Maria [Reachi], the model. This is Jean-Claude Killy, the skier. That's Georgia O'Keeffe. And Sophia... she was so beautiful. This is Picasso, he went like a model" – Vaccaro strikes a stilted pose – "and I wanted him to calm down. So I take my camera, shake it, and say, 'I think this thing is broken!' That second, Picasso stopped posing, and I had my picture."

Technically, Vaccaro retired in the early Eighties, after *Look* and *Life* both closed. But he's never stopped taking photographs. Even now, there are new cameras to be bought and causes to fight for. (Amid the medals in a glass display case near his desk are badges from Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro's 1984 presidential campaign, stamped with Vaccaro's portraits of the candidates). Cradling his 75-year-old Argus camera, Vaccaro waxes lyrical about the latest Leica. "That will replace this," he says, pointing out the M3 he used for most of his career, soon to join the collection of old Rolleiflexes on one of the studio tables. "And now I have this place, where I plan to do something special about →



ABOVE: HUBERT DE GIVENCHY, PARIS, JUNE 1960. OPPOSITE: AN AMERICAN INFANTRYMAN RUNS FOR COVER CARRYING A .30-CALIBRE BROWNING MACHINE GUN DURING THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE, THE ARDENNES, BELGIUM, JANUARY 1945

this country that I love, America. Now, I photograph situations that deal with man's progress on this earth, that's what I deal with."

"Tony is a photographer who deserves to be as well-known, and become as much of a household name, as 10 or 20 other photographers people can rattle off," says Sidney Monroe, the gallery owner who now represents him. "His career was as varied and exceptional as any of them; the diversity and depth of his archive is extraordinary."

"That was Mr Lewis," Vaccaro reiterates, matter of factly. "When he told me that I was a born photographer, I had to listen. So I became... well, I don't want to say I'm the best photographer." He pauses, and scans some of his pictures before swivelling back. "But I'd like to find one that's better."

"[Robert] Capa said, 'Your pictures aren't good enough unless you're close enough,'" writer Alex Kershaw says in *Underfire*. "Well, no one got closer than an infantryman to the war. And no one was closer than Tony. None of the great photographers. No one got as close as him on a daily basis. Not by a million miles."

"I had the privilege of seeing him in Santa Fe after all these years," MacGraw says, "at a screening of his documentary. And here's what was

amazing – no, not amazing – what was deeply moving. His words before the film. I mean, he could hardly speak, he was so emotional. It's the difference between flying in, getting the shot and getting the hell out, and being inside that hell, day after day. This lovely young man shot what he was living."

Vaccaro keeps coming back to the fallen body of Henry Tannenbaum, the shot that's become one of the most iconic depictions of warfare. He's spent a lifetime revisiting his pictures, and observing as the world keeps slipping back into war. He's been both lucky and unlucky enough to witness some of modern history's defining moments and has survived to tell the tale. His eyes saw worlds ending and being reborn. And his pictures hold all that you can ask of great pictures: the truth.

"If you look at the landings in Normandy," Vaccaro says, "you see the soldiers coming across [the beach] and all they do is fall. Suddenly, life comes to an end and gravity takes you. I don't understand whoever started this idea of doing this upwards thing," as he flings his arms up in mock shock. "Even Hollywood movies, when gangsters kill each other, they go like this."

He shrugs and shakes his head. "It doesn't happen that way." ENDS

