In Gaza last summer, photojournalists all too often were first responders, and near-victims as well.

In Rafah, an explosion sent dust swirling toward the windows of the front-line apartment where Sergey Ponomarev was based. He rushed outside, helped victims, and then, when rescuers arrived, captured the drama of their work.

Crisscrossing Gaza, Wissam Nassar found his work inseparable from his life: He saw his parked car destroyed by explosives, his community traumatized, his hometown scarred, as he made searing close-ups of the chaos, then zoomed out to the landscapes that placed loss and pain in context.

And in Gaza City, moments after Israeli ordnance killed four boys on a beach, Tyler Hicks was the first person to arrive, at an eerily quiet scene.

During a brief rest in his hotel room, Hicks was startled by a blast. Glancing outside, he saw a seaside shack and boys running. He felt a second explosion, and small bodies dotted the sand. He grabbed his cameras and body armor and ran.

At the beach’s edge, Hicks paused, knowing, as he later wrote, that dashing onto the sand could make him a target. He waited for the perfect moment — as he always does — to make the picture that came to symbolize the Gaza war. The photo’s enormous impact came from the broken body in the foreground, a stark symbol of the war’s toll on civilians. But a second look reveals Hicks’s subtle perception, even at such a moment. A man carrying another boy glances toward rescuers as if in supplication. Tattered beach awnings flutter, waves crash, ordinary seaside rhythms contrasting with the chaos of moments before.

With bravery, perseverance and a practiced eye, the New York Times team in Gaza transformed speed and luck into arresting news photos — as artful and informative as they were urgent — that defined the war for a global public.

Gaza in 2014 was one of the world’s most challenging photojournalism environments. “There is no safe place,” Hicks wrote, as there are no bomb shelters in Gaza. “Bombs can land at any time, anywhere.” In throbbing heat, journalists could not drink water publicly during Ramadan. Hamas fighters remained largely underground, making it difficult to explain some events visually. (Some critics accused news outlets, including The Times, of ignoring Hamas’s weapons and military activities, but Times journalists covered them extensively, and Times photographers produced images of armed Hamas men and their weapons.) Photojournalists lived a psychologically grueling cycle: ruins smoking at dawn; grief and despair at hospitals and morgues; afternoon funerals.

Yet the Times team refused to let those images become routine.

Noted for his painterly compositions, Ponomarev captured the interplay of near and far in multiple planes, setting off details with the found frames of windows and stairwells. The absence denoted by a gurney empty except for a blood smear contrasts with the crush of anxious faces behind windows nearby.

Long frustrated by the challenge of photographing women in a conservative society, Ponomarev looked up from a body being prepared for burial and caught female faces peering down from every floor of a wraparound staircase — at once illustrating an extended family’s grief and women’s confinement. (Bloggers
spuriously accused Ponomarev of staging a series of photos of two grieving brothers because blood was absent from one’s face in later images; that was because the man had washed his face between shots.)

Nassar focused in on raw emotions, sometimes seeming to concentrate all of Gaza’s grief into the private world of a single person — a father’s grimace over his young son’s body, the anguish of a relative of a Hamas fighter. Yet some of his most unforgettable shots also took in the scale of the desolation, like the haunting glow of a campfire in a dark expanse of rubble, lights twinkling on the horizon like a dream of normal life immeasurably far away.

Hicks displayed the uncanny right-place, right-time instinct that spurred his Pulitzer-winning coverage of the 2013 Nairobi mall attack. In Gaza, defying danger and exhaustion, he positioned himself to capture pivotal moments with striking detail: bystanders scattering before a towering cloud, a woman reacting to the sight of a ruined home while sinking into an oddly intact armchair.

The Times team’s work had far-reaching impact. It helped drive new attention toward the toll on civilians and infrastructure in Gaza and spurred intense debate about how the news media covers the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other conflicts. The three photojournalists multiplied this impact by publishing their photographs on social media, with accompanying notes on how they made the images and their personal reactions. The material was widely shared and republished in English, Arabic, Hebrew and other media and social media.

We are proud to nominate the Times team — Sergey Ponomarev, Wissam Nassar and Tyler Hicks — for the Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Photography.