

Obituary

One of the bravest war correspondents of her generation

Marie Colvin

1956-2012

Foreign Correspondent

Marie Colvin went further and stayed longer than other war reporters – it was what gave her journalism the intimacy and authenticity that set it aside, and what led to her death last Wednesday.

The previous week, over dinner in Beirut, I told her that sneaking across the border into Syria and the besieged Homs suburb of Bab Amr was beyond my danger threshold. She felt compelled to go nonetheless. “Anyway, it’s what we do,” she said. Once there, she sent me an email: “Well, not sure it was my smartest move but I have made it to Baba Amro. Nightmare here, but so anger-making it is worth it.”

That anger came through in her final dispatch for The Sunday Times, in which she described the “widows’ basement”, where civilians sheltered from constant bombardment by Syrian government forces. “The

international community has not come to the aid of the innocent caught in this hell,” she wrote.

While driven by a determination to “make a difference”, she was no polemicist but an old-fashioned reporter who believed that being an eye-witness was the most important thing. Writing for a Sunday paper, she had more time than those of us doing daily journalism – but that exposed her to greater danger. While we would go in and out as quickly as possible, she stayed. Last year she spent nine weeks in Misurata under siege by Gaddafi’s forces. In 1999, when almost all other journalists fled East Timor, she stayed in the UN compound with the terrified Timorese, hiding from rampaging Indonesian troops and paramilitaries.

She was the best company you could wish for on the road and also in London, where she threw great parties inviting politicians, journalists, aristocrats, actors and poets. She wore a tight black cocktail dress, mixed a mean vodka martini, smoked excessively and took lovers. Her personal life was turbulent: she



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married three times, twice to the same man. In recent years, she liked to go ocean sailing with her partner Richard Flaye. On her last trip into Homs she described “climbing over walls in the dark and slipping into muddy trenches”, but under her jeans and the thermals she borrowed from a fellow correspondent she was probably wearing lacy underwear – she always did. Marie had no interest in any debate about female war correspondents – she knew she was braver and better than most of the men. But she was hugely supportive to other reporters, especially those younger and less experienced.

Born and brought up in Long Island, she studied anthropology at Yale in the 1970s where a fellow student remembers her as a “character”, wearing “a lot of all-black outfits, high heels, scarves, [and] smoking thousands of cigarettes a day”. She became a reporter in New York and was then posted to Paris by United Press International. She joined The Sunday Times in 1986. Such was her charm and skill, she got more than others

out of tricky interviewees such as Gaddafi and Yassir Arafat. There was, however, a limit. When Gaddafi asked her to put on a pair of little green slippers – green being his favourite colour – before an interview, she refused, saying that her feet were too big. On another occasion, he sent a Bulgarian nurse to her hotel room to take her blood because he was worried she was looking weak. Having staved off the hypodermic needle, she tried to check out but the hotel refused to relinquish her passport. Luckily Arafat’s security detail were in the lobby. They secured the passport and drove her to the airport.

After his death, her observations on Arafat’s complex character revealed how well she knew him – he once told her how many minutes a year he saved by shaving only every five days, he put hot tea on his cornflakes and pressure invigorated him. “One of the greatest problems with Arafat was that he really was ready to die,” she wrote. “That was when he was happiest.”

Yet the people who mattered most

to Marie were not famous. I remember calling her before she had an operation on her left eye, which she had lost when a Sri Lankan soldier threw a grenade at her as she crossed from Tamil Tiger-held territory. It was, she told me, hard to cry and she needed to because she was so moved after receiving dozens of letters from Tamils asking if they could donate her their eye. (After the injury, she always wore an eye-patch – she had one studded with rhinestones for parties.)

On Tuesday, when we spoke on Skype from the Homs’ makeshift media centre, she was desperate about the wounded around her, including a baby who had died before her eyes. “This is the worst we’ve ever seen,” she said. “And they’re getting away with it.” A few hours later the media centre was hit, and she was killed by a rocket as she tried to escape. She was 56.

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