

Women Journalists During World War II

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“I can’t change my sex. But you can change your policy.”¹ Helen Kirkpatrick’s response to the editor of the *Chicago Daily News* provides a great example of the difficulties women journalists and war correspondents faced during World War II. The editor, who of course was male, informed Kirkpatrick that the *Chicago Daily News* did not hire women. Women journalists found it difficult to land jobs simply because they were female. World War II offered women reporters job opportunities and a chance to shine. Men were called to fight in the war, leaving their jobs open and only women left to fill them, though women reporters were criticized and stereotyped. Many women reporters and war correspondents overcame the critics and stereotypes set upon them by reporting on the war, despite their difficulties. Marguerite Higgins, Margaret Bourke-White, and Dorothy Thompson were just a few of the successful women journalists who reported on the war. World War II changed the view of women in the newsroom and gave them the same opportunities as men.

Challenging the stereotype of female reporters was easier said than done for women. Due to stereotypes, editors refused to hire women or treated them differently if they did get hired. Negative opinions of women originated before World War II. One example was that women simply were not strong enough to face the war. One source says, “Society had believed women were fragile creatures who lacked the mental skills to interpret the news.”² However, by “society” they meant “men.” Men assumed women were incompetent, bound to stay home and cook for the strong working men. In the newsroom, men referred to women as paper dolls, a term from the Great Depression. “Paper dolls became a popular children’s toy. The flat figures cut from cardboard were flimsy. The cardboard bends; the paper rips.” The name “paper dolls” insinuated that women reporters lacked sturdiness and substance.³ In a 1944 article for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Stanley Frank and Paul Sann, said women reporters “(a) can’t spell, (b) don’t ask the right questions, (c) lack imagination, (d) won’t get specific

¹Julia Edwards, *Women of the World: The Great War Correspondents* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1988), 108.

²Catherine Gourley, *War, Women, and the News: How Female Journalists Won the Battle to Cover World War II* (New York: Atheneum Books For Young Readers, 2007), 3.

³Gourley, *War, Women, and The News* 91-92.

information.”⁴ Editors flat out thought women were not smart enough to report the war and should stick to writing about beauty.

However, just because men thought women reporters were not smart enough does not mean they were right. The Library of Congress Exhibit, “Women Come to the Front,” explains that “at the turn of the twentieth century, the women’s suffrage movement opened opportunities for female reporters...[Women] often worked without permanent office space, salaries, or access to social clubs and backrooms where men conducted business.”⁴ They put up with these horrible conditions because they wanted to work in the newsroom. Despite their poor treatment, women started forming their own organizations. The most popular of these organizations was the Women’s National Press Association.⁵ It was dedicated to achieving equal rights for women journalists and played a vital role in the women’s rights movement. The movement started gaining momentum before World War II and grew rapidly during the 1940s. War allowed women to step up and take over the positions that were vacated by men going to fight. “Women have invaded,” Frank and Sann explained, “masculine precincts on newspapers as finance, politics, sports, and the police beat. Paper dolls are reading copy, working on the rewrite desk, taking pictures. They are covering riots, crimes of purple passion, train wrecks, fires and suicides without swooning. Much to the astonishment of the misogynists who work along-side them, the paper always appears on time, it is reasonably free of errors and there has not yet been a deluge of libel suits or indignant readers canceling their subscriptions.”⁶ Women were no longer just making copies or writing about fashion. They were able to cover the positions men left behind without struggling like men thought they would.

Women war correspondents also had to deal with restrictions set on them by the United States’ War Department. Nancy Caldwell Sorel said, “Every reporter and photographer moving into the war zone had first to be accredited to a particular branch of the service (usually the U.S. Army) so that the War Department could keep track of them.”⁷ Though this applied to all correspondents, male or female, the women

⁴Library of Congress Interpretive Programs Office, “Women Come To The Front: Journalists, Photographers, and Broadcasters During World War II.” <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aopx?id=45716>

⁵Stanley Frank and Paul Sann, “Paper Dolls,” *Saturday Evening Post*. May 20, 1944, 20, 93.

⁶Frank and Sann, “Paper Dolls” 20.

⁷Nancy Caldwell Sorel, *The Women Who Wrote the War* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), 170.

correspondents experienced more restrictions than men. Women were not permitted to go further than women's services, such as the Red Cross Nurse's stations. Thus, they could not cover actual combat zones. "Any women correspondents in a war zone were to be accompanied by an officer...if such officers were not available for escort service, the women would be in violation of the rules."⁸ Women had to find alternate ways to accomplish what they set out to do. For example, Margaret Bourke-White, when informed she could not fly, took a ship to her destination instead. Iris Carpenter, a reporter fighting for a story on the war, complained, "The only chance a newspaper girl had of talking to troops was by touring camps with the Red Cross doughnut girls."⁹ Peggy Hull, a correspondent stationed in Hawaii, felt the pressure of the restrictions under General Douglas MacArthur that did not allow women reporters in the Southwest Pacific.¹⁰ Rather than giving up, Hull pushed back and soon the restrictions were lifted. However, Hull said, "Our presence in various fields is bitterly resented by the men we compete with...Overwhelming obstacles are frequently set up to prevent us from working."¹¹ After the War Department abolished the restrictions, women still fought harder than men to report their stories. Mark Jenkins wrote in his article, "Gal Reporters': Breaking Barriers in World War II", women reporters "had to hustle harder than their male colleagues. For theirs was a double war: the war against the enemy, and the war against the system. They had to fight red tape, condescension, disdain, outright hostility, and downright lewdness."¹² Women were not only fighting for a chance to report the war but also for an equal playing field with male reporters.

The most famous of female war correspondents during World War II was Marguerite Higgins. In her lifetime, Higgins "received fifty journalism awards, including the 1951 Pulitzer Prize for Foreign Correspondence. [She was] the first women ever to receive this award." She earned all these before she turned thirty-six.¹³ One of the first awards she received was from the "New York Newspaper Women's Club for her story – and participation in – the May 1945 liberation of

⁸Julia Edwards, *Women of the World*, 149.

⁹Lilya Wagner, *Women War Correspondents of World War II* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 21.

¹⁰Sorel, *The Women Who Wrote the War* 293.

¹¹Sorel, *The Women Who Wrote the War* 293-294.

¹²Mark Jenkins, "Gal Reporters': Breaking Barriers in World War II." http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/12/1210/_031210_warwomen.html.

¹³Madelon Golden Shilpp and Sharon Murphy, *Great Women of the Press* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 191.

Dachau.”¹⁴ Dachau was one of the largest Nazi death camps. Higgins and fellow reporter, Peter Furst, from *The Stars and Stripes*, “were the first two Americans to enter the [enclosure] at Dachau.”¹⁵ Instead of waiting for the troops to arrive and deal with the guards, Higgins “spoke in forceful German to the guards...[saying] ‘Come here, please. We are Americans.’”¹⁶ The guards surrendered to the reporters and Higgins and Furst opened the gates to free the prisoners. This was remarkable at the time because people were not used to women accomplishing great achievements.

Higgins’ award-winning article about the liberation of Dachau was published in the *New York Herald Tribune*. From reading this article, it is obvious that she was proud of herself for being the first on the scene. By repeating the same fact multiple times, Higgins ensures the reader could not miss it. She starts off saying that her and “Peter Furst, of the army newspaper ‘Stars and Stripes,’ were the first two Americans to enter the enclosure at Dachau.” But later in the article she explains once more that she “happened to be the first through the gate.”¹⁷ She wanted to clarify that although they were both there, she was before Furst, making her literally the first person through the gates. Not only was she a woman reporting the war, but she had a role in the war. Higgins was a prime example of women overcoming the difficulties of being a female journalist.

Margaret Bourke-White was the first American female war correspondent recognized by the U.S. Department of War. This allowed her to wear a uniform as if she was a soldier, differing only with a letter “C” on the arm, standing for “correspondent.” Unlike most women in the field, she was allowed to work in combat zones without arguing with officials. The Department of War allowed her to accompany air force pilots and take pictures as they went on a bombing raid, making her the first female photojournalists to do so.¹⁸ She covered many aspects of the war, including the London Blitz, the Russian war efforts, and other battles in World War II.¹⁹ She did not let the fact that she was a woman stop her from reporting and taking pictures of the war. Sorel’s

¹⁴Barbara Belford, *Brilliant Bylines* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 289-290.

¹⁵Belford, *Brilliant Bylines*, 293.

¹⁶Gourley, *War, Women, and the News*, 138.

¹⁷Marguerite Higgins, “33,000 Dachau Captives Freed by 7th Army,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 1, 1945.

¹⁸Gourley, *War, Women, and the News*, 70-71.

¹⁹Gerry J. Gilmore, “Women Journalists Came of Age Covering World War II.” Defense.gov.

The Women Who Wrote the War quoted Bourke-White, saying, "You can do one of two things: put your mind on your work, or worry about what people are saying about you. The two do not mix."²⁰

Even with a respectable reputation, Bourke-White still encountered bumps in the road. "She was denied access to cover the Allied invasion of North Africa, the excuse being that it was too dangerous for a woman to fly there from England."²¹ Instead of admitting defeat, she took a ship. She was determined to catch the story and did whatever was needed to acquire it. During a military ban on civilian cameras, she would sneak "photographs however she could, including from her hotel balcony....she turned her bathroom into a darkroom filled with her paraphernalia, and hid out under her bed when air-raid inspectors knocked on her door."²² The laws that tried to keep journalists out of war zones acted more like guidelines to Bourke-White, seeing as she still gathered information for her stories with them in place.

Bourke-White's book, *They Called It "Purple Heart Valley,"* describes her experiences in Italy during the war. Unlike most male writers, she makes the war front seem almost peaceful. In a part of her book she writes,

"Everything was so still, so pure, that it seemed impossible that from this same mountain such hell could have gushed forth the night before. As we drove toward the front, in this crystalline light, even the signs of war took on a softened character. The tanks and half-tracks and mules, crowded under olive groves so as to be screened from the air, seemed there for some peaceful purpose. The soldiers peeping out of caves and clustered in sheltered ravines might have been resting during a hiking trip planned by a tourist agency. Ancient villages, hanging like fairy castles in the cliffs, took on such magic in the slanting sun that one forgot that every wall was pockmarked and every roof had crashed into rubble. The Italian landscape became a picture-postcard background for war."²³

Like many women, she tried to find something good or beautiful within the ugly war and she did. Rather than saying she saw tanks and soldiers hiding, she chose to depict the scene as if it was a picture.

Another American journalist, Dorothy Thompson, wrote her opinions in her own column, "On the Record," which was printed in

²⁰Sorel, *The Women Who Wrote the War*, 191.

²¹Mark Jenkins, "Gal Reporters".

²²Shilpp and Murphy, *Great Women of the Press* 187.

²³Margaret Bourke-White, *They Called it "Purple Heart Valley"* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1944), 134.

over 170 newspapers. She also reported for the *New York Tribune*. In her writing, she tried to warn her readers about the “up-and-coming Adolf Hitler.” In her opinion, Hitler and his National Socialist followers were a “threat to world peace”²⁴ She warned America that “Germany was preparing for war.” In 1931 she wrote, “Nazism... Fascism... Totalitarianism... For the sake of these words and what they represent, bombs fall; yesterday in Ethiopia, today in China and in Spain, tomorrow – where?”²⁵ War had not yet begun but Thompson, as well as many other correspondents, knew it was coming. She tried to warn her readers but, even though many people followed her reporting, very few took Thompson’s warnings seriously.

In Thompson’s writing, she made the war, specifically the people, seem less horrific. In her article, “There Was a Man,” she had nothing but great praises for Winston Churchill. Her writing was somewhat poetic, as if she was writing a love poem about him. When describing Churchill’s speech, she said,

Not in generations have such words of passionate love and measured indignation fallen from English lips as Churchill uttered in the series of speeches called ‘While England Slept.’ And while he spoke to them, while he spoke mostly to unheeding ears, the shadow was lengthening and finally loomed so tall and menacing that all the world could see. And then, when it was over them with all the full darkness of its horror and destruction, the people of England, the common people of England, lifted Churchill on their hands, crying, ‘Speak and fight for us!’²⁶

With nothing bad to say about Churchill, it seems as if she admired him greatly. Usually, male journalists would not sound this poetic, as they would stick strictly to the facts. Thompson, along with other women reporters, gave readers a new perspective. Rather than regurgitating facts, they wrote with great detail, as if writing a poem.

At the war’s end, things in the newsroom started to go back to the way they were before the war. “Paper dolls across the country gave up their typewriters as they had agreed to do. Normalcy in the newsroom was a return to the days of labeling women as ‘newshens.’ Some women kept their jobs, but their assignments shifted from front-page news back to the women’s pages again.”²⁷ However, some women reporters

²⁴Gilmore, “Women Journalists Came of Age Covering World War II.”

²⁵Gourley, *War, Women, and the News*, 46-47.

²⁶Dorothy Thompson, “There Was a Man,” *Life*, January 24, 1941, 69.

²⁷Gourley, *Women, War, and the News* 163.

defended themselves and insisted other women reporters do the same. Margaret Barnard Pickel urged women to fight against stereotypes. In a 1945 article for the *New York Times* she states, "Citizens in the fullest sense, American women must shoulder their full responsibility, for they cannot hide behind the excuse that they have to put up with a man-made world." She tried to prevent women reverting back to the male-dominated business world before the war. She wanted them to keep the momentum of the female journalists and challenge themselves even further. Later in the article, she continues, "The world of the future will not be a man's world...it will be the kind of world that men and women, citizens equally, choose to make it." Pickel believed that women will be treated the same as men in the future, but only if women stand up for themselves.²⁸ This idea was not the belief of Pickel alone; many women in this time agreed with her. At the war's end, women were expected to "make room" for men returning from war, who wanted their reporting jobs back. However, "Women began to question social and economic rules and demand equal access to educational and career options."²⁹ Helen Rogers Reid, of the *Herald Tribune*, believed that "women, married or not, should work and be economically independent."³⁰ Many female reporters who agreed with Reid did not want to give up their jobs, which they earned with hard work and dedication during the war.

Though the quote by Marilyn Monroe is over used, it still holds true: "Well behaved women rarely make history." Women fought harder to report the war just to prove to everybody, especially their male colleagues, that they could. If they had given up when editors and the government told them to, the classic stereotype of women being inferior to their male colleagues would still apply after the war. The war allowed female news writers to start reporting on a more level playing field and started a movement towards more equal rights for women in the newsroom. A political reporter and war correspondent May Craig, in her speech to the Women's National Press Club in 1944 said, "The war has given women a chance to show what they can do in the news world, and they have done well."³¹

²⁸Margaret Barnard Pickel, "There's Still a Lot for Women to Learn," *New York Times*, November 11, 1945.

²⁹Library of Congress, "Women Come to the Front."

³⁰Sorel, *The Women Who Wrote the War*, 179.

³¹Library of Congress, "Women Come to the Front."