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# Marguerite Higgins: Making War Accessible to the Masses

Kelli A. Knerr  
kknerr1@ewu.edu

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## Margarite Higgins: Making War Accessible to the Masses

Kelli Ann Knerr

*“To acquire knowledge, one must study; but to acquire wisdom, one must observe.” – Marilyn vos Savant*

Click clack, click clack, click clack. The train on its tracks is swaying gently and making all the comforting sounds. Click clack, click clack, click clack. I settle in to my high-backed seat and open my laptop, eternally grateful for technology, and my mind starts wandering. It wanders to a woman who not many know of, but who has had a profound impact on the world. Marguerite Higgins. I whisper her name under my breathe almost as a prayer, calling upon her to help guide me through. Marguerite Higgins, now there was a woman who could write. She changed journalism while at the forefront of many world events.

### **Family Life and Younger Years**

“While the German Big Bertha rocked the Paris street above them, [the] two attractive and volatile young people were drawn instantly to one another.”<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Daniel Higgins and Marguerite de Goddard met in a WWI bomb shelter.

Higgins was a law student in California when the Great War broke out and like, presumably, most young men, he longed to do his part. It was his “glorious escape.”<sup>2</sup> His escape took him to Cherbourg, France and into the arms of the woman who would be his wife and mother of his only child, Marguerite.

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<sup>1</sup> Antoinette May, *Witness to War* (New York, New York: Beaufort Books, Inc., 1983), 17.

<sup>2</sup> May, *Witness*, 17.

de Goddard left her family in Lyon and came to Paris as the war broke out. She knew that there would be ample opportunity to meet someone. One can imagine the two lovers sipping on champagne in a war-torn city, hiding from the barrage of artillery in the metro. “The dashing American adventurer and the spirited mademoiselle, it was inevitable that they would love and marry. The focal point of their love and the panacea for their disillusionment was their only daughter.”<sup>3</sup>

Maggie was born on September 3, 1920 in Hong Kong and she “resembled an exquisite doll with curly blonde hair and eyes like two great blue sapphires.”<sup>4</sup> Her family was ecstatic! However, tragedy struck when Maggie was 6 months old. She contracted malaria. The doctor suggested that they take a trip to what would become Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Maggie recovered fully.

That first trip at 6 months old was the first of many trips and vacations in young Maggie’s life. She went on “yearly sea voyages to France”<sup>6</sup> where she visited with her doting aunties. Maggie had a “careless confidence”<sup>7</sup> and was the “constant source of pride and pleasure to her parents.”<sup>8</sup>

The idyllic world the Higgins had created in Hong Kong came to a halt when Maggie had reached the age for formal education. They boarded an ocean liner and headed for California.

The Higgins bought a house in the foothills of Oakland and secured Maggie a spot at the prestigious Anna Head school, where Mrs. Higgins taught French. At school, Maggie was athletic and studious. At home, Maggie was a rebellious child who ran away for two days,

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<sup>3</sup> May, *Witness*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> May, *Witness*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> May, *Witness*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> May, *Witness*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> May, *Witness*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> May, *Witness*, 21.

“taking with her enough food and water for herself and her dog, Foxy.”<sup>9</sup> One can’t tell if she was being rebellious or simply wanting to escape the increasing family drama at home. Maggie liked to listen to her father’s war stories and Mrs. Higgins felt as if she were being ignored and had taken to fainting in public to command attention.<sup>10</sup>

### **College Days**

In the summer of 1937, Maggie was getting ready to enter the University of California – Berkeley. Her mother was fussing around her, trying to finish sewing Maggie’s wardrobe. Mrs. Higgins was all aflutter with the thought of her daughter joining a sorority and would be “nothing less than sensational.”<sup>11</sup> Maggie had other things on her mind. She had just heard the news of Amelia Earhart. Maggie had her mind on the reporters who “flocked to the South Pacific to cover the mysterious disappearance.”<sup>12</sup> Since she had started to concentrate on journalism during her sophomore year in High School, she determined, “that’s the kind of journalist I’ll be. Making Headlines, not just writing them.”<sup>13</sup>

Much to her mother’s chagrin and her own disappointment, Maggie didn’t rush Alpha Phi with the other girls from her high school. She instead rushed with a friend at Gamma Phi Beta. She was the perfect sorority girl, attending teas and socials, achieving “top grades”<sup>14</sup> and attracting all the boys. She had a fierce competitive streak and quite possibly wanted to show the Alpha Phis what they were missing.

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<sup>9</sup> May, *Witness*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> May, *Witness*, 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> May, *Witness*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> May, *Witness*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> May, *Witness*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> May, *Witness*, 35.

Early in her college career, Maggie joined the staff of the *Daily Californian*, which was the university paper. She found this much more suited to her personality and goals. She started to oppose the sorority life. Maggie defied curfews and was openly sexually active in a time where “the conduct code for coeds was strictly enforced.”<sup>15</sup> Eventually, there was a hearing to decide her fate in the Sorority and the decision was made to ask Maggie to return her pin. She didn’t even care enough to show up at the hearing.

In June of 1941, Maggie graduated with honors and her degree. She declared, “I’m going to New York.”<sup>16</sup>

### **New York and Early days of Journalism**

The wave of emotions that comes from starting a new adventure are plenty. First there is excitement, then anticipation, then a sense of adventure, and finally fear. It was no different for Marguerite Higgins. She had finished college and she had given herself “just a year in which to land a newspaper job.”<sup>17</sup> Higgins had been across the west coast and mid-west and had been rejected. She was about to give up, but she had decided to go to New York, just to see what would happen. When she reached New York with “one suitcase, a surplus of seven dollars, [and] a letter of introduction to an uncle and aunt living on Long Island,”<sup>18</sup> she stepped off the train and asked a newspaper stand in Times Square where the nearest newspaper office was. She might have taken one deep breath and marched towards the building that the man at the stand gestured to. However, she got there, she found herself in the lobby of the New York *Herald-Tribune*. She was a bit wary at this point because in the recent past, she had never made it past

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<sup>15</sup> May, *Witness*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> May, *Witness*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Marguerite Higgins, *News is a Singular Thing* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & CO., 1955), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Higgins, *News*, 16.

the eagle-eyed secretaries. Higgins got off the elevator and with an “air of confidence”<sup>19</sup> strolled right past the desk into the city room. She was absolutely in shock. Her plan worked. As she was gawking around the room, she was in awe. She had “never seen so many typewriters in one place or been in such a relentlessly brightly lit room.”<sup>20</sup> Panic began to set in. What had she done? She strode to the nearest desk, with what she hoped was appropriate confidence, and boldly asked the reporter, “Where is the city editor and, by the way, what’s his name?”<sup>21</sup> The, rightfully startled, man glanced up at Higgins and then back at his desk and mumbled, “His name is Engelking and he’s the tall guy sitting at the big desk over there in the middle of the room.”<sup>22</sup>

Dressed in a “sky-blue gaberdine suit”<sup>23</sup> Higgins marched up to Engelking and firmly stated, “I’m looking for a job.”<sup>24</sup> Nerves may have been coursing through Higgins’s system, but she didn’t let on one way or the other. This man held the key to Higgins future. As Engelking perused Higgins’s portfolio, he said, “You know, kid...you really must be crazy to leave a perfectly good state like California and try to crack a newspaper town as tough as New York. What with the draft taking so many of the staff, we may have to fill in with a few women. Come back in a month. There may be an opening.”<sup>25</sup> Higgins was staying in New York!

One month turned into ten before Higgins was placed on the payroll of the *Herald-Tribune*. In the interim, Higgins had to find something to help keep her afloat. She had “gotten quite familiar with the art of applying for the right scholarship at the right time” and she “knew the angles on how to make studying a paying business.”<sup>26</sup> She enrolled in Columbia University

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<sup>19</sup> Higgins, *News*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Higgins, *News*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Higgins, *News*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Higgins, *News*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Higgins, *News*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Higgins, *News*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Higgins, *News*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Higgins, *News*, 23.

Graduate School of Journalism at the very last minute. Higgins only got in because someone dropped out and all her documents were in order. Higgins had placed a long-distance phone call to her father in Oakland and he, in turn, woke up one her former professors at two o'clock in the morning for the required letters of recommendation.<sup>27</sup>

After doing the “impossible” by enrolling in Journalism School, Higgins was disappointed to discover that a classmate was already working for the *Herald-Tribune* as the correspondent for Columbia. Murray Morgan was a “stringer,” which means he was paid by the “number of inches he wrote.” Murray was so talented that he was offered a better job with *Time* magazine before too long.<sup>28</sup>

Before he left the *Herald-Tribune*, Murry “recommended [her] very highly. But Engel told me he didn’t want to hire a woman reporter.”<sup>29</sup> She was getting “weary of attempting the impossible.”<sup>30</sup> However, she “hustled [herself] into the brand new green cloth coat with the mink collar and cuffs that she bought for thirty-five dollars at Klein’s and hustled to the *Herald-Tribune* building.”<sup>31</sup>

Engel pushed back in his chair and stared Higgins down. “You think you could do it, eh?”<sup>32</sup> The silence stretched between them. Higgins stood her ground and emphatically replied, “Yes.”<sup>33</sup>

There was another excruciatingly long silence. “Well, do you think you could start today?”<sup>34</sup>

Higgins had finally secured a spot at the *Herald-Tribune*!

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<sup>27</sup> Higgins, *News*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Higgins, *News*, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Higgins, *News*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Higgins, *News*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Higgins, *News*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Higgins, *News*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Higgins, *News*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Higgins, *News*, 25.

## World War II

Higgins swaggered into the appropriately named Hotel Scribe, Paris in February of 1945.

Amidst the clutter of “helmets, musette bags, mud caked typewriters, [and] bedrolls,”<sup>35</sup> Higgins stood freshly pressed in her “olive drab war correspondent’s uniform.”<sup>36</sup> One can imagine how out of place she felt. She was amongst her heroes. Writers like Hemingway and Vincent Sheean were lounging about the lobby. Higgins wrote in her diary that night, “I, war correspondent Marguerite Higgins, am a colleague of war correspondent Ernest Hemingway. How about that?”<sup>37</sup>

As she was the newbie, Higgins was assigned stories that weren’t exactly, in her opinion, news worthy. Her first story was about “the hottest Sunday in three years.”<sup>38</sup> She wanted to be on the front lines writing about things that mattered. Her big break came when she talked herself onto an Air Force flight heading across the Rhine. On April 29 and April 30, Higgins secured two front page stories. One “gave an eyewitness account of the American Army’s capture of Dachau concentration camp, and the other described the liberation of Munich.”<sup>39</sup>

In Dachau, Higgins was one of the first to see “the specially built ovens where the Nazis burned the bodies of the concentration camp victims who had been tortured to death or had died of starvation and disease.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Higgins, *News*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Higgins, *News*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Higgins, *News*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Higgins, *News*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Higgins, *News*, 70.

<sup>40</sup> Higgins, *News*, 75.

After those first two stories, Higgins's byline was a regular feature on the front page of the *Herald-Tribune*. She interviewed "virtually every top Nazi, including Reich Marshal Hermann Wilhelm Goering."<sup>41</sup>

## **Korea**

Communism invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. The fuzzy reports implied impending doom. "America had to decide at once whether to lend fighting support to its South Korean protégé or cede it outright to the Reds."<sup>42</sup>

A plane was streaking across the sky under "jet-fighter cover"<sup>43</sup> with four journalists on board. Higgins was one of the only witnesses to America's "entry into the battle for Korea."<sup>44</sup> She was determined to reach the front and secure her story. She felt as if failure wasn't an option. She says doggedly, "Failure to reach the front would undermine all my arguments that I was entitled to the same assignment breaks as any man."<sup>45</sup>

Seoul was still safe! The plane landed amongst abandoned vehicles from those who had fled earlier in the day. Her eyes glittered. She had "a world scoop."<sup>46</sup>

Higgins advanced and retreated thorough a barrage of incoming fire for the next few days. She slept where and when she could. All for a story.

It is said that General MacArthur had "decided on an amphibious assault in Korea almost immediately after he learned of President Truman's decision to commit ground troops."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Higgins, *News*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Marguerite Higgins, *War in Korea* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & CO., 1951), 15.

<sup>43</sup> Higgins, *War*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Higgins, *War*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Higgins, *War*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Higgins, *War*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Higgins, *War*, 135.

Higgins requested to be on these landing craft. She was given the standard run around. “Navy tradition is strictly anti-female” and there were “no facilities.”<sup>48</sup> However, when she went to pick up her orders of “four neatly mimeographed sheets,” they announced that “Miss Higgins could board ‘any navy ship.’”<sup>49</sup>

Higgins made her way to Pusan Harbor with a sense of urgency. She assumed the transports were leaving right away. When she arrived, she was rejected for the first few transports, despite her orders. Not one to give up so easily, she tried Capitan Fradd of the *Henrico*. Fradd perused her orders and had her escorted aboard. The *Henrico* even boasted an extra cabin for Higgins.

Four days later, they reached Inchon. The Marines, along with Higgins, were briefed on the “technical difficulties”<sup>50</sup> of the upcoming battle. They were to land at Red Beach, which “really wasn’t a beach at all, but a rough sea wall of big boulders.”<sup>51</sup>

Suddenly, a shout raised up. “Wave number Five!” Higgins took her pre-assigned place and made her way to the landing craft. It must have looked like a strange version of hell. Fire from mortar rounds, the constant barrage of noise, and various forms of ammunition flying in all directions. Higgins landed on the beach with the 5th Division of US Marines and lived to tell the story.

### **Time behind the Iron Curtain**

To Whom it May Concern:

This is being written to counteract any statements made by me in the event that I should be arrested in the Soviet Union. This letter constitutes advance denial of any injurious

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<sup>48</sup> Higgins, *War*, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Higgins, *War*, 137.

<sup>50</sup> Higgins, *War*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> Higgins, *War*, 139.

utterances whatsoever against the United States that might be attributed to or actually delivered by me as a result of duress or torture.

Sincerely,

Marguerite Higgins<sup>52</sup>

In 1955 Higgins spent ten weeks behind the Iron Curtain. She documented life in the Soviet Union. She traveled by train across the country to see what life was like. Higgins was one of the first to do so. She wrote the above letter and mailed it to a friend in the State department. While there, Higgins got arrested 16 times. Nothing was ever concluded from these arrests, but they were nerve-wracking all the same.

Higgins visited hospitals, schools, the theatre, and many other places. Everywhere she went, she was shown only what the Russian government wanted her to see. On the rare occasion she got to speak with a citizen, she found them charming and sincere. She found Russia to be “a country of many secrets but few mysteries.”<sup>53</sup>

## **Vietnam**

In July of 1963, Higgins landed in Vietnam. Higgins was a completely different woman than the one swaggering into the Hotel Scribe in Paris many years ago. Now, she was a veteran war correspondent with a Pulitzer Prize for her coverage of the Korean war under her belt. She had a syndicated column with the New York *Herald-Tribune*. War was just a way of life for Higgins.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Marguerite Higgins, *Red Plush and Black Bread* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & CO., 1955), 17.

<sup>53</sup> Higgins, *Red Plush*, 252.

<sup>54</sup> Virginia Elwood-Akers, *Women War Correspondents in the Vietnam War, 1961-1975* (Virginia Elwood-Akers, United States of America, 1988), 17-24.

## After War

Marguerite Higgins had a life most could only dream about. She had her dream career. She received many accolades and awards, including a “Pulitzer, the George Polk Memorial Award, the Marine Corps Reserve Officer’s Association Award, The Veterans of Foreign Wars Gold medal, and a special award from the New York Newspaper Women’s Club.”<sup>55</sup> There is one thing that she desperately wanted but didn’t have. She wanted a “love both true and deep; a man to whom I could be both friend and lover; a man who would need no other lover than hers.”<sup>56</sup> She didn’t find that. Her heart ached for love and that was the one thing she couldn’t do.

I was startled out of my reverie by a kindly conductor. “Miss. We are here.” I quickly packed up my laptop and gathered my belongings. I stepped off the train and into Grand Central Station, just as my hero had many years ago. I was in New York and I was going to make my mark.

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<sup>55</sup> Higgins, *News*, 244.

<sup>56</sup> Higgins, *News*, 245.

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