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Review by John A. Nagl, US Army War College

When attending policy and award dinners in Washington, I always try to be seated next to the military correspondents, whom I find far more interesting and less guarded than the government or military officials who are the center of attention for most. The journalists, I have learned, are intensely intellectually curious, always have a good story—often about the policymaker who is giving the after-dinner address—and of course, ask the best questions.

Sadly, Marguerite “Maggie” Higgins—the most famous journalist in the world at one point in her storied career—was long gone before I joined the rubber chicken circuit she knew so well, dead at age 45 of a parasitic disease she contracted while covering the war in Vietnam. I would have had a lot of competition to get a seat next to her, as Jennet Conant reveals in her new biography, *Fierce Ambition: The Life and Legend of War Correspondent Maggie Higgins*.

Higgins is a biographer’s dream; she lived more vividly, had more adventures, and made more of an impact than most who live to twice her age. (It is impossible to write about Higgins without using cliches; Conant does not, and I will not even try.) Conant begins the book with the story of how Higgins scooped the liberation of the German concentration camp at Dachau. Having previously covered the liberation of Buchenwald, she had an idea of what she was going to see there; the reality was worse than she had imagined. The first American inside the gates bearing the inscription “Arbeit Macht Frei” was Higgins, who told the prisoners (in multiple languages) that they had been liberated. They responded with the enthusiasm one might expect; Higgins was nearly crushed in the melee. It took half an hour for the US Forty-Second Division to catch up with her. Higgins was so focused on getting the story from the prisoners that she missed her deadline; her report ran on the front page of the *Herald Tribune* a day late, alongside another scoop from Higgins reporting on the capture of Munich the day after the liberation of Dachau. The US Army later gave her a campaign ribbon recognizing her service (1-13).

Higgins got the scoop by driving ahead of Army units in a jeep driven by Sergeant Peter Furst, a reporter for *Stars and Stripes*, surrendering Nazi soldiers loaded down the back of the Jeep with their weapons as the two passed them on the road to Dachau. Conant reports that Higgins was sharing not just a Jeep but also a sleeping bag with Furst in what appears to have been something of a pattern of such behavior; Higgins would later claim the tune from *Oklahoma*, “I’m Just a Girl Who Cain’t Say No” as her personal theme song (234). No book on a male reporter of similar stature would focus so intently on the sex life of its subject, or see his colleagues discussing his exploits on the record as openly as did so many of Higgins’ colleagues—another of the unique challenges faced by one of the first female war correspondents.
Conant’s narrative is unsparing in her treatment of Higgins’s personal life, noting that the nineteen-year-old reporter for the Daily Californian at Berkeley underwent an illegal abortion after that paper’s editor impregnated her during a joint reporting trip to Mexico (31). Less than five years later, she and Sergeant Furst spent several days celebrating the liberation of Munich in a Nazi architect’s abandoned mansion. Furst later said that “It was quite wonderful” to share a bath and champagne with Higgins during their sojourn, during which Higgins cheerfully admitted to him that she had slept with the foreign editor of the New York Herald Tribune to procure the assignment to Germany (97). After covering the Nuremberg war trials and the Berlin Blockade, she became the Tribune’s Berlin bureau chief—and was then reassigned to Tokyo when her boss discovered that she was having an affair with a married American general there (150), a more serious offense than her earlier affair with Ed Morrow of the rival New York Times, which got him reassigned for sleeping with the competition (141).

It was a good time (if not a good reason) to be sent to Asia. Higgins covered the opening days of the Korean War from the front lines but General Walton Walker, who thought that it was too dangerous for a woman to be there, banned her from the country. General Douglas MacArthur personally overturned the decision and welcomed Higgins back to the front, but the Navy refused to allow her aboard a combat ship during the imminent amphibious assault on Inchon. A bureaucratic mix-up gave Higgins the chance to hitch a ride on the USS Henrico carrying elements of the Fifth Marine Regiment to Inchon. She went ashore at Red Beach with the fifth wave of Marines but the first to face opposition from a surprised North Korean enemy. Her photo of Marine Lieutenant Baldomero Lopez leading his men over the seawall, taken a few minutes before his death, is iconic and provides some sense of the danger she exposed herself to repeatedly; Lopez was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions that day.

Her account made the front page of the Herald Tribune when she filed it that night from the USS McKinley, McArthur’s flagship, but the Navy now knew that it had made a mistake and only allowed her to remain aboard the ship that first night. For the rest of the battle, Higgins had to sleep on the docks and send her dispatches back with fellow reporter Keyes Beech to file them while her male counterparts filed from aboard ship, slept on bunks, and took hot showers. Working under far more difficult conditions than the male reporters, Higgins shared the Pulitzer Prize in 1951 with five other (all male) Korean War reporters, becoming the first woman to earn that honor at a time when women were not allowed to be members of the National Press Club.

Despite her Korean War affair with Beech (one of the reporters with whom Higgins shared the 1951 Pulitzer), Higgins still held a candle for Bill Hall, the Air Force general with whom she had the affair that precipitated her earlier departure from Berlin (153). They married in Reno in 1952 on the day his divorce was finalized; he was 45, she 31. They lost a daughter who lived just a few days, but then had a son and a daughter and, after Hall’s retirement from the Air Force, settled in Washington and became a power couple, although she carried on yet another affair with fellow reporter Pete Lisagor when Hall took a job in New York (281). Higgins was very close to President John F. Kennedy, whom she addressed as “Jack”; he gave her his private number and told her to call him at any time, day or night, to confirm the facts of a story (271), an

2 The photograph is available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baldomero_L%C3%B3pez#/media/File:Lopez_scaling_seawall.jpg.
extraordinary coup for any reporter. Indefatigable despite the responsibilities of motherhood, Higgins covered the early days of the Vietnam War, there contracting the leishmaniasis that ended her life at age 45.5

The sexism she faced throughout her career is astounding. Walter Cronkite, then 30-years old, complimented Higgins’s drive while adding a brutal dig, saying “She dug and dug—she left no stone—or person—untouched” (111). While the New York Times’ Drew Middleton stated that “That gal doesn’t scare easily, I think she has ice water in her veins,” (140) others were not as kind. The Tribune’s Carl Levin noted that “I always thought it was unfair that she advanced on her back” (151). In what was a common phrase at the time, competing reporters complained that Higgins “offered more than lowered lashes to get the story” (151).

Conant, the author of six previous books,6 was helped enormously in the writing of this one by the work of Kathleen Kearney Keechen, who wrote her master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation at the University of Maryland on Higgins and generously shared her unpublished interviews and other research with Conant (332).7 This gesture would not likely have been made by Higgins herself, who once checked out all the books and journals on a topic assigned to her class at Colombia School of Journalism so that her classmates would not have access to the material (39). She had fierce ambition, indeed; they were likely necessary for her success given the obstacles she faced and overcame.

A number of the war correspondents I got to know in Iraq and Afghanistan and sat next to at Washington policy dinners were women. Their road, still harder than that of the men with whom they compete for stories, is easier than it was for Higgins, even if they still face the rumors and double standards that her ambition and courage overcame.8 And although I never got the chance to meet Higgins in person, I fervently hope that Fierce Ambition leads to a movie about her life. Actors should fight for the chance to portray her extraordinary life as hard as she fought for a scoop.
