

This Day in History... September 3, 1920

Birth of Marguerite Higgins

Marguerite Higgins Hall was born on September 3, 1920, in Hong Kong, China. A war correspondent for World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, she was the first woman awarded a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting.

Higgins spent the first three years of her life in Hong Kong, where her father worked for a shipping company. The family then moved to Oakland. Higgins went on to attend the University of California, where she wrote for *The Daily Californian*. After graduating in 1941 with a BA in French, Higgins went to New York where she was determined to find a job at a newspaper. She applied to the *New York Herald Tribune*, but they told her to come back in a month and they might have a job for her.

Higgins then applied to the Columbia University School of Journalism. She was initially rejected because the school claimed to have filled all the spots allotted for women. Higgins persisted and they eventually agreed that if a student dropped out and she could get her transcripts and five letters of recommendation, she could be admitted. Higgins did her part and a student dropped out the day before classes began, so she was enrolled.



Higgins was present at the liberation of Dachau.

Higgins impressed her professors with her intelligence and ambition. In 1942, she became the campus correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*, which opened the door for a full-time journalist position. Higgins wanted to become a war correspondent and pressed her bosses to send her to Europe in 1944. She was initially stationed in London and Paris.

To get closer to the front line, Higgins followed a US Army unit into Germany, and arrived at Dachau concentration camp before the troops. Speaking German, she told the Nazi guards that she was with the US Army and that the war was over. The guards gave her their guns! Later, she said that it was “one of the most terrible and wonderful days of the war.” She later received a US Army campaign ribbon for her assistance there. Higgins went on to cover the Nuremberg trials and the Soviet Union’s blockade of Berlin.

Higgins was made chief of the *Tribune*’s Tokyo Bureau in 1950. Within months, the Korean War broke out and she was one of the first reporters to arrive in the battle zone. Higgins was among a group of reporters trapped on the North bank of the Han River after the Hangang Bridge bombing. After reaching the US military headquarters in Suwon the next day, General Walton Walker ordered her to leave the country, claiming that women didn’t belong at the front. Higgins took the case to General Douglas MacArthur who announced, “Ban on women correspondents in Korea has been lifted. Marguerite Higgins is held in highest professional esteem by everyone.”

MacArthur’s announcement was a major step for all female reporters and made Higgins a celebrity in her own right. She went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting for her coverage of the Korean War. She was the first woman to receive that award. After the war, she continued to cover international news, interviewing figures such as Francisco Franco, Nikita Khrushchev, and Jawaharlal Nehru. She became chief of the paper’s Moscow bureau and was the first American correspondent allowed into the Soviet Union following Joseph Stalin’s death.

In 1963, Higgins joined *Newsday* and was sent to cover the Vietnam War. During that war, she visited hundreds of villages, interviewed many significant people, and wrote a book on her experiences. Late in 1965, she caught leishmaniasis, a rare tropical disease in Vietnam that quickly led to her death on January 3, 1966. Higgins later received the Order of Diplomatic Service Merit from South Korea, one of the nation’s highest honors.



Higgins stamp from the 2002 Women in Journalism issue



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