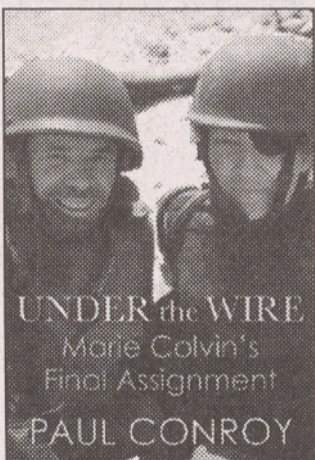


A member of the Free Syrian Army holds his weapon as he sits on a sofa in the middle of a street in Deir al-Zor April 2, 2013.

REUTERS/ KHALIL ASHAWI

Described as the “greatest war correspondent of her generation,” Marie Colvin was killed in Syria in 2012. Under the Wire is photographer Paul Conroy’s gripping account of the year spent on assignment with her.



“Under the Wire: Marie Colvin’s Final Assignment” by Paul Conroy.

Published in the UK by Quercus and set for U.S. release by Perseus Books on Oct. 7.

BY AMY MACKINNON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It’s a very chaotic room. But the baby’s death was just heartbreaking, possibly because he was so quiet... the doctor said there’s nothing we can do. We just watched this little boy, his little tummy heaving and heaving as he tried to breathe. It was horrific. My heart broke.”

These were some of Marie Colvin’s final words to the world. On a cold evening in February 2012, huddled in a half-destroyed house in the besieged city of Homs, Syria, Colvin delivered her simmering final dispatch over Skype to CNN’s Anderson Cooper. Just seven hours later, the Sunday Times journalist was dead, killed in a rocket attack on the house she was working from.

A war correspondent for more than 25 years, Colvin saw more conflict zones than even the most battle-hardened general; Iran, Libya, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, to name but a few. Driven by a desire to bear witness and speak truth to power, Colvin gave a voice to those who had none, often at great personal cost to herself. She lost her left eye in a grenade attack in Sri Lanka in 2001 and during an eight-day hike across a Chechen mountain pass, she braved hunger and exposure while fleeing Russian forces.

The story of Marie’s fatal final assignment in the embattled Baba Amr district of Homs, is told for the first time in a powerful new book by her photographer colleague and friend, Paul Conroy, who was also injured in the attack which killed Marie.

The title of the book, ‘Under the Wire’, alludes to Colvin and Conroy’s route into Syria which was not just under the wire, but underground. Smuggled into Syria by rebels from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the journalists made their way into Baba Amr through a three-kilometer-long storm tunnel,

which Conroy describes in his book as “crawling into your own waking nightmare.”

“Not even the smallest of us could stand upright in the tunnel... There was also the air. It was heating up rapidly as we drew further from the entrance and it was obviously less oxygenated... Muscles started to cramp due to our body positions and the lack of oxygen...”

“We emerged gasping from the underground sarcophagus into a changed world. Explosion followed explosion, the earth shook and the sky flashed stroboscopic white... Our world had changed forever. There could be no return from this place.”

Colvin and Conroy had previously worked together during the siege of Misrata, Libya. Of all the conflicts they had both covered in their combined 35 years in war zones, Conroy says that they agreed that Misrata was the worst they’d ever seen, until they got to Homs:

“When we got into Homs and Baba Amr, it was just off the scale of what we’d seen before... In Baba Amr there was no option, everywhere was being shelled, there was nowhere that you would class as even remotely safe, because of the size and the amount of munitions being thrown in, there was no hiding place.

“(In Libya) there was always a safe zone, a fallback zone that wasn’t in the hands of the government, so you could pull back to Benghazi, regroup, get your mind together... whereas once we went into Syria, we were straight into enemy-controlled area and you’re right in the middle of it... there was no safe zone.

“We’d sleep at night knowing that Assad’s troops were a kilometer away and all the warning we were going to get was, ‘they’re coming.’ And that was it, it was get out of the window and disappear into the olive groves.

“With Libya you could see a way forward, you could see what was going to happen.”

Conroy believes that it was Gaddafi’s notorious paranoia that ultimately contributed to his downfall:

“We went to an air force base, and the whole base had just 20 rounds of ammunition in it, to arm the guards, they weren’t even trusted with more than 20 rounds of ammunition, and every round was accounted for.”

With the Syrian Civil War dragging into its third year, it would appear that Assad’s forces – unlike Gaddafi’s – have no shortage of ammunition. Having spent six years in the British Army as an artillery man, Conroy knows munitions and was able to recognize the sheer scale of the military operation the rebels faced;

“...the levels of ammunition stocks that they had were just phenomenal. I could never really work out just how they kept them replenished in such a constant flow... most British artilleries, we could not have sustained that rate of fire with the stocks of ammunition that we carried - we just couldn’t do it...”

The Syrian regime has remained well-stocked thanks to numerous arms deals with Russia, and whilst there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that weapons have been used indiscriminately against civilians, Russian President Vladimir Putin has defended his decision to continue supplying the regime, arguing that it’s well within the bounds of international law. With Russian-made missiles raining down on Baba Amr, Conroy recalls how Putin was known locally as “The Butcher of Homs.”

Conroy now works alongside Amnesty International to campaign for tougher arms trade controls. In March 2012, just weeks after his harrowing escape from Syria, and

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