PAUL CONROY ON MARIE COLVIN AND THE PERSONAL COST OF COVERING WAR

On 31 January 2019, a US court found Syria’s Assad regime responsible for the murder of renowned Sunday Times journalist Marie Colvin in 2012. As a feature film about Marie goes on release in the UK, we spoke with its director Matthew Heineman and freelance photographer Paul Conroy – Marie’s close friend and colleague – about the personal cost of covering conflict and the importance of telling Marie’s story at a time when journalists are increasingly coming under attack.

In her landmark ruling last week, US District Judge Amy Berman Jackson said Marie was “specifically targeted because of her profession, for the purpose of silencing those reporting on the growing opposition movement in the country”, adding that “The murder of journalists acting in their professional capacity could have a chilling effect on reporting such events worldwide”.

For Paul Conroy, the ruling is a vindication. He sustained severe injuries in the explosion that killed Marie and French freelance photographer Rémi Ochlik in the city of Homs on 22 February 2012. With his expertise as a former soldier with the Royal Artillery, Paul has always argued that the way in which the bombs closed in on the makeshift media centre revealed that the Syrian army was pinpointing its target. Marie had made broadcasts to the BBC, Channel 4 and CNN from the centre, telling them that the bombing of Homs was slaughtering civilians, not terrorists. He says the regime was “savvy enough to know” that Marie’s reporting could influence international opinion. She was a widely celebrated, highly respected foreign correspondent and the world was listening.

Paul’s 2013 book, Under the Wire, tells the story of that last terrifying assignment with Marie. It is also a moving account of their friendship and the final year they spent together. A documentary of the same name, featuring Paul, was released in cinemas last year and will be broadcast on BBC Four on 11 February. He has also been busy working as a consultant on Matthew Heineman’s forthcoming feature film, A Private War, starring Rosamund Pike as Marie Colvin and Jamie Dornan as Paul, which focuses on the last 10 years of Marie’s life. Matthew, who directed award-winning documentaries Cartel Land and City of Ghosts, has described his first narrative feature as a “love letter to journalism and an homage to Marie Colvin”. The film is glossy, but also serious. It explores the unavoidable consequences of covering conflict and the psychological impact on Marie – including the increasing disconnect she felt from her home life in London.

“That’s not really something that is looked at or talked about too often”, says Paul. “It tends to be something that people keep to themselves because there are so many reasons not to talk about it. In many ways, Marie and I got into a habit. We’d go out [on a story] for months and then find it all a bit hard work when we got home. Consequently, when the desk would call and say ‘do you want to go here?’, we’d both jump at it because it was actually far easier to keep working than it was to sit and go through all of the stuff that you have to when you touch ground in England. That’s the hard part – [getting] back to a normal way of life.”

Paul joined A Private War after talking with Marie’s friends and family, who encouraged his participation and saw the value of having a trusted insider on the project to give advice and input. “Once I’d got clearance from Marie’s sister, Cat [Colvin], then I said yeah. Primarily because of Matt, I respected his work. I had been warned about Hollywood, i.e. they let you on set for a day and then you’ll be shoved off to a parking lot somewhere. But I worked fully with Matt on the script and then I was there for every single day of
In Jordan, Matthew Heineman spent months painstakingly recreating scenes in Sri Lanka, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and Syria. Having worked in conflict zones as a documentary filmmaker, he says he “wanted to bring an authenticity to Marie and to the worlds that she visited. I wanted to make people feel like they were there – to put people on the ground in these places.” With this in mind he also worked with non-actors as extras, casting Syrian refugees in key scenes, including those set in the Horns media centre.

“It got to me when they were [filming] in the media centre where we were having one of our final conversations”, recalls Paul. “It was so realistic, the set design, the location was so authentic – and I’d see them in full make-up being me and Marie. It reminded me just how much I missed what we had. It’s not very often that you get to see yourself portrayed like that, you know, the things you did reconstructed in great detail and that was a real sadness.”

“There were so many funny moments between me and Marie. She had an incredible sense of humour. I’d tell Jamie and Ros that and I think it helped that they knew it wasn’t all completely serious and near-death experiences all the time. It’s another way we’d stay sane. You know, minutes before Marie was killed we were laughing and giggling in the corridor. So when I see that scene [at a screening] I remember that and I try not to giggle because it’s probably inappropriate.”

Paul recognises the choices that Matthew Heineman had to make to bring Marie’s story to a wider audience. “He’s showing the long-term effects of doing this [job] which I don’t think a documentary can
ever really cover – its accumulative effect. He’s showing Marie going to all these countries, getting the fear, being attacked, losing the sight in her eye – the long-term price that she paid. And it’s not just Marie. I keep counting the number of people who go through similar results of continuing to be in war zones for that long. You know, it’s rifle. Relationships are destroyed. The last line of my book is something like, ‘I think my personal life remains one of the last hostile environments in which to operate’. And I think that’s what Matt’s film covers. As a whole, it covers that far more effectively than a documentary would.”

Matthew says he wanted to look at the moral injury of war for journalists through Marie’s story. “It was particularly important for me to show that at this time. We live in a world of fake news and sound bites and very polarised media, and the fact that journalists are being demonised is sad to me. I think Marie would be quite devastated by the view of journalists today. When she started her career the risks of being a journalist were usually a consequence of embedding with whoever you were with – being shot at, IUD’s, bombs. The idea of being a target wasn’t in the lexicon of options necessarily. The fact that she was deliberately tracked, targeted and killed by the Assad regime was quite new then and these risks have obviously increased a ton since her death. There are journalists dying every week around the world for telling stories that have to be told.”

By telling Marie’s story now, Paul says Matthew is standing up for journalism at a crucial time. “I think it’s good to have someone iconic to point at and say, ‘Here is an example of someone who cared for what she did and her subject matter so much that it cost her her life’. It’s hitting through a really current debate about the press and journalism.”