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Professional Notes

Trust but Verify: Myths and Misinformation in the History of Women War Correspondents

By Carolyn Edy

Journalists, historians, and other researchers know the value of primary sources, as well as the importance of treating any source with skepticism. We all know, too well, the saying “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” But what if your mother is a journalist, or even a historian? The short answer is you approach her statements the same way. And yet I have found that historians, at least when they are describing the history of female journalists in times of war, have not always treated their sources equally; that is, they have not always taken the same critical, investigative approach when their source also happened to be a journalist, historian, or military official.

Often historians have had justifiable reasons for taking a more trusting or biased approach to their sources or source material, but in the case of the history of female war correspondents, this approach nonetheless has led to misinformation and myths that historians and so many others continue to perpetuate. My intent is not to diminish anyone’s contributions; instead, I hope to correct and expand the record while also starting a conversation that could lead historians to explore similar problems within other foundational texts, which could in turn reveal countless new areas of research.

Problem One: First Things Aren’t First

Most texts, films, and exhibits that describe the history of female war correspondents will either tell you that in 1918 Peggy Hull became the first woman to gain military accreditation as a war correspondent or that women were not granted military credentials as war correspondents until World War II. Neither statement is correct, but both statements also ascribe a meaning to accreditation that you will rarely find in discussions of male war correspondents.

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While Peggy Hull often promoted herself as the first woman to gain American military credentials and the only woman to do so during World War I, the War Department did not sign off on her correspondent's pass until November 15, 1918, four days after the war ended.¹ More importantly, dozens of women reported on aspects of the war throughout World War I, and at least eighteen of these women had military credentials as visiting war correspondents. The War Department's list of visiting correspondents of longest service during World War I contained sixteen names, two of whom were women: Cecil Dorrian and Elizabeth Frazer.²

Despite her fame, Hull was not on this list. Nor was Hull included in the write-up describing the performance of forty-seven war correspondents—including Dorrian and two other women—that Captain Arthur Hartzell submitted to the American Expeditionary Forces in March 1918. In his description, Hartzell noted that Dorrian "wrote more intelligently about the operations of the Army than any other woman correspondent, if one judges her writing from a military viewpoint. Miss Dorrian came over here late last spring and visited the battlefields at various times. Her work is well known throughout the Eastern part of the United States."³ When Dorrian died eight years later, in 1926, an article on the front page of the *Newark Evening News* noted that she had been "the first accredited American woman war correspondent to reach the battlefield in France in 1918."⁴

Presentism slips in when we talk about military accreditation of female war correspondents, as does a gendered bias. Most discussions of male war correspondents do not take the same defensive stance, instead

¹"War Correspondent's Pass" (Peggy Hull Deuell Papers, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence, KS).

²"Lists of Correspondents, Accredited + Visiting; Correspondence and Other Records Relating to Press Correspondence in Territory Occupied by Allied Armies, 1917-19," Personnel, Miscellaneous, in REG 120: Record of the American Expeditionary Forces (World War I) General Headquarters; General Staff; G-2; Censorship and Press Division (G-2-D), Correspondence and Other Records Relating to Press Correspondence in Territory Occupied by Allied Armies, 1917-19, Personnel, Miscellaneous Box 6132NM-91 Entry 228. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³Arthur E. Hartzell, Captain, Inf., USA, G2D, GHQ, Am.E.F., to Colonel Moreno, March 3, 1919; "Lists of Correspondents, Accredited + Visiting," Correspondence and Other Records Relating to Press Correspondence in Territory Occupied by Allied Armies, 1917-19; Personnel, Miscellaneous; REG 120 Record of the American Expeditionary Forces (World War I) General Headquarters; General Staff; G-2; Censorship and Press Division (G-2-D) Correspondence and Other Records Relating to Press Correspondence in Territory Occupied by Allied Armies, 1917-19, Personnel, Miscellaneous Box 6132NM-91 Entry 228. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴"Death Comes to Cecil I. Dorrian: News's European Correspondent Saw Thrilling Events in Great War," *Newark Evening News*, August 17, 1918; Associated Press, "American Woman War Correspondent, First Accredited, Is Dead," *Morning Herald* (Gloversville, NY), August 19, 1926.

letting the term “war correspondent” suffice without citing evidence of accreditation. In truth, anyone could (and often did) don and even flaunt the “war correspondent” title. Some specials whose publications billed them as war correspondents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were writing at desks hundreds of miles from any battle zone. At the same time, many more who worked as war correspondents on various fronts received no such billing because their articles ran without bylines. Whether the military considered someone to be a war correspondent was another matter, and yet military accreditation, in and of itself, wasn’t much proof of anything.

The process and requirements of military accreditation evolved throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the mid-1800s, war correspondents needed only show up to write about war. By the late 1800s they had only to acquire permission in the form of a letter from the Office of the Secretary of War. The process changed drastically by 1915, when requirements for accreditation of war correspondents became nearly insurmountable—so that the Army’s final count of war correspondents who were granted full accreditation was thirty-six, all men whose newspapers backed them with exorbitant bonds.⁵ At that time, the War Department had another category of credentials as well, one it provided to “visiting war correspondents.” The Army listed ninety-two (seventy-four men and eighteen women) as the final count for this group, although several historians have reported a far higher number, apparently defining visiting war correspondents more broadly. The accreditation process eased up again in World War II, so that by then the requirements were similar to those governing visiting war correspondents in 1919.

Therefore, even Dorrian (whose full story I am researching for an upcoming article) could not have been the first woman to gain accreditation as a war correspondent. Two decades before the Allied Expeditionary Forces recognized Dorrian and Frazer for their service as war correspondents in World War I, the War Department granted military credentials to maybe a dozen female journalists as war correspondents to cover the Spanish American War. Clara Bewick Colby’s newspaper, the *Woman’s Tribune*, announced on July 9, 1898, that she was the first woman ever to receive military credentials when Assistant Secretary of War C. D. Meiklejohn signed off on the 357th war correspondent’s pass, which certified Colby as “duly accredited to the War Department as a Correspondent for the *Woman’s Tribune*.”⁶

Newspapers around the country ran the story as well, holding up the claim that Colby was the first ever. And yet it was not true. Colby had not been the first woman to secure a correspondent’s pass, even during

⁵Carolyn M. Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent, the US Military, and the Press, 1846–1947* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 34.

⁶“War Correspondence,” *Woman’s Tribune*, July 9, 1898.

the Spanish American War. Nearly two months earlier, on May 12, 1898, Miss Anna Benjamin received “War Correspondent’s Pass No. 226,” certifying that she had been “duly accredited to the War Department” and stipulating that “military commanders are requested to permit him to pass freely, so far as in their judgment it is proper to do so, and to extend to him such aid and protection, not incompatible with the interests of the service, as he may require.”⁷

Nor could you say that any of these women writing in 1898 were the first female journalists to travel with military credentials. Teresa Dean had military credentials as an official war correspondent, a label she nonetheless deemed an exaggeration, when she traveled to Pine Ridge in 1891 to cover the Sioux Indian conflict for the *Chicago Herald*, and it is likely that the Native American reporter Susette “Bright Eyes” Tibbles had them as well, when she arrived at Pine Ridge to write for the *Omaha World-Herald* in December 1890.⁸

Problem Two: The Usual Suspects

Here again, most texts, films, exhibits, and so forth that describe the history of female war correspondents will tell you that the United States military accredited between 100 and 130 women as war correspondents to cover World War II, with some listing the names of the correspondents included in that count. The number and the lists are wrong. When I first dug into the names on the published lists that appear in several books, as well as within the Library of Congress online exhibit “Women Come to the Front,” I noticed some misspelled names as well as some duplicates, where women were listed by both their married and given names.⁹ Soon after, I noticed that these lists also omitted the names of some of the most experienced female war correspondents who gained military accreditation during World War II. In fact, my research examining military records in the National Archives, including copies of war correspondent passes, status updates, theater award records, and correspondence from all theaters of war, revealed that the US military had accredited at least 180 women during World War II.¹⁰

Why would those published lists veer so far from names documented in military records and further corroborated by press clippings and

⁷Anna Northend Benjamin’s “War Correspondent’s Pass No. 226,” William Dummer Northend family papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University; and “She Saw Santiago with Our Army,” *San Francisco Call*, June 11, 1899.

⁸Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*, 18–21.

⁹Library of Congress. “Accredited Women Correspondents during World War II,” Women Come to the Front, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/wcf/wcf0005.html>.

¹⁰Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*, 143–49.

official correspondence? As best as I can tell, one well-meaning source was Barney Oldfield, a public relations officer during World War II who wrote a memoir and later assisted several authors who wrote about female war correspondents.¹¹ Most of the secondary sources that purport to give a full number or complete list of names cite a list from Oldfield's memoir, with some authors adding other names as they arose from interviews with editors, war correspondents, military officials, and others. But even some of these additional names were questionable, if not wrong; one list includes "Debs Meyers," a man accredited as a *Yank* writer. Thus another obvious factor to inaccuracies, duplications, and omissions in these lists is that no one had fully vetted them against multiple, credible sources.

I first took on this task myself about ten years ago, and it was an incredibly time-consuming, nearly thankless task. Individual military units varied widely in their documentation strategies and standards. While some units did publish status updates and accreditation lists, at either monthly or unpredictable intervals, these were generally incomplete, inconsistent, and error-prone. I documented names and dates from as many lists and status updates as I could find in extant military records, and then I attempted to check this information against each individual's war correspondent pass (when available), as well as news clippings, military memoranda, and biographical records. In the end, this process helped me identify more than 180 women who gained accreditation during World War II. And yet as thorough as I tried to be, it is likely that my list, too, contains errors and omissions just waiting for another historian to uncover.

Nonetheless, I can say with certainty that at least 250 women were identified by their own publications as war correspondents from 1846 to 1947.¹² And yet we continue to read and hear about the same few dozen or so individuals, women who are often promoted as though they were the first and only of their kind. While you might assume that we continue to focus on these women because they were the most accomplished or even the most typical, that is not always the case. Instead, it often comes down to visibility, access—and archives. The women who promoted themselves throughout their careers, the women whom the press promoted as novelties and as the subject of the stories themselves, as well as those whose clippings, correspondence, and other papers are stored in library collections, are easiest for historians to find. The same is true for those individuals who best survived the war, physically and mentally, and who lived long enough for researchers and writers to interview them.

¹¹Barney Oldfield, *Never a Shot in Anger* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1956).

¹²Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*, 128, 136–49.

In my research of women who worked as war correspondents, I was surprised to discover that many of the women who had earned the greatest respect from military officials, readers, and editors alike seem to have nearly disappeared from public memory, such as not only Cecil Dorrian, but also Mildred Farwell, whose bylined war correspondence appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* from 1916 to 1918, and Lee Carson, who covered the United States First Army for International News Service in World War II. Or even Helen Kirkpatrick, who gained military accreditation early in 1942 and five years later became one of just nineteen war correspondents (and the only woman at the time) to be awarded the Medal of Freedom for her coverage of World War II.¹³ It is convenient to write about the individuals who are well known and easier to find, and even more convenient to envision a single experience for them all, but these shortcuts lead to misconceptions.

Problem Three: Of a Certain Partiality

While journalists might have been meticulous about verifying facts for stories they covered, they were not always so scrupulous in the ways they presented themselves to the public. In fact, women “of a certain age” often felt the need to misinform the public on details that they preferred to keep private. As I read census and immigration documents related to many of the women in my research, I discovered an uncanny anti-aging formula, one that caused the individual’s year of birth to change every year the census taker or other government official asked the question. Lee Carson’s birth year, for example, gradually crept from 1916 to 1921 in census records and other official government documents. Her obituary suggested she had been born in 1922.¹⁴ Teresa Dean’s birth year crept from 1851 to 1860 over the years. And the husband whose death led Dean to call herself a widow for most of her life? It is an unlikely story. Dean was divorced twice, but by all records and accounts I have been able to find, appears never to have been widowed at all.¹⁵ Even historians who are not interested in an individual’s age or relationship history might benefit from the examples set by Dean and Carson, as a reminder to rely, whenever possible, on multiple, credible sources.

Some of us might hope to reduce the number of hardships, years, or pounds we accrue over time, while others also on aspects of their lives they would prefer to enhance. Consider the examples set by Inez Robb and Ruth Cowan. By the start of World War II, Inez Callaway Robb was already a household name as a columnist for INS with the “world as her

¹³Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*, 52–58, 112.

¹⁴“Lee Carson Reeves, War Correspondent,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1973.

¹⁵Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*, 18, 30n22.

beat.”¹⁶ The contract she had signed with INS in 1938 reportedly made her the highest-paid female reporter in the world, earning \$500 a week plus expenses.¹⁷ After reporting on women’s war work in England, Robb sought accreditation to cover the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps, beginning in June 1942. On October 17, 1942, the War Department granted Robb’s request and accredited her to the WAACs as a war correspondent. Robb mistakenly proclaimed that her credentials were “the first such ever issued to a woman.”¹⁸

A month later, Ruth Cowan, an Associated Press reporter who covered the woman’s angle in Washington, DC, decided she wanted to cover the war abroad and sent a note to Oveta Culp Hobby, the head of the War Department’s newly formed Woman’s Interest Section. Cowan had been out of the country only three times, on vacations to Canada and Mexico, and her salary was about a tenth of Robb’s.¹⁹ In an unpublished memoir she wrote shortly after the war, Cowan described the night she first realized Robb was the other woman accredited to the WAACs.

I had dinner with Wiley Smith of the Hearst organization, and Inez Robb. She had but recently returned from a flying trip to England to do a series of stories about the British women in the war. I had seen her in Washington a couple weeks before and there was a rumor that she was going back overseas. At dinner that night I bumped against her accidentally. She involuntarily shuddered. I looked at her. “Ah,” I said to myself, “she is the other woman who is going.” Later I was formally told this by a war department source. ... Inez Robb is one of the very best reporters in the game, and a very grand person—witty, gay. How glad I was. But of course what competition. She had long been reputed to be the highest paid woman reporter in the country.²⁰

¹⁶Carolyn Edy, “Juggernaut in Kid Gloves: Inez Callaway Robb, 1901–1979,” *American Journalism* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 83–103.

¹⁷“Newspaper Women Open 38th Annual Convention Friday,” *Mansfield (MA) News-Journal*, October 27, 1938.

¹⁸Inez Robb Letter to Seymour Berkson, managing editor of International News Service, undated, from unprocessed papers, Inez Callaway Robb, Robert E. Smylie Archives, College of Idaho, Caldwell, Idaho. Robb recounts the process of accreditation for her editor and indicates that she was writing sometime in early January 1943.

¹⁹Employee’s Declaration Form NNI-140; and Ruth Cowan’s 1942 income tax return, which reported that she had earned \$3,839.47 from salaries and other compensation for personal services, with deductible expenses of 743.59, and a net income of \$3095.88. Ruth Cowan Nash Papers, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

²⁰Ruth Cowan, “Why Go to War,” an unpublished manuscript, 63–64, Ruth Cowan–Papers, Schlesinger Library.

Several letters in the years after the war allude to a rift and some tension between the two women that likely started with their time together in North Africa. By the time an oral historian interviewed Cowan in 1987, Inez Robb had long since died of complications relating to Parkinson's disease, and International News Service had been all but forgotten as well.²¹ Whether intentionally or not, Cowan shifted the narrative, telling it as though she had been the reporter who had first secured credentials to accompany the WAACs, allowing Robb to tag along.

Then you want to know how Inez Robb got involved in the thing. Well, I had some very good friends in New York that I used to go up and visit like that—Wiley Smith ... When I would come to town, he would take me to dinner ... Somehow or other, that evening we encountered Inez Robb.... I said, "Gosh, I'm going to get to go overseas." Well, she just went to work right now, trying to go, too. I felt that it didn't bother me that there would be another woman in the thing or anything like that, whether I would go alone or she would be with me, or anything else. So we sort of joined forces to get this ball rolling.²²

It might not matter much who gained accreditation first or how, but these discrepancies are an important reminder that just because individuals have a certain expertise or a firsthand memory of an event is no reason to forgo verifying their accounts with multiple credible sources.

Problem Four: Differences and Disempowerment

Two myths that I see repeatedly perpetuated are that the US military had formal policies in place to limit the work of female war correspondents up through World War II and that the most significant barrier facing all female war correspondents was sexism within the military. In fact, I discovered in my research that no military regulation mentioned sex as a factor for excluding or limiting women from war correspondence until the summer of 1944.²³ Before that time, any rules limiting women's involvement as war correspondents were "written in invisible ink," as Margaret Bourke-White once explained, and varied considerably by military unit.²⁴ Several less visible factors hindered women's success as war

²¹Edy, "Juggernaut in Kid Gloves," 16; International News Service merged with United Press in 1958 and became United Press International.

²²"Interview with Ruth Cowan Nash by Margot H. Knight," Women in Journalism oral history project of the Washington Press Club Foundation, September 26, 1987, page 23, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University and other repositories.

²³Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*, 120–24.

²⁴Margaret Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 202; and Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*, 93–100.

correspondents, and we are in danger of overlooking the significance of these if we simply blame all barriers on sexism.

In my research, I found that the US military accredited a number of highly qualified female war correspondents beginning with its entrance into the war in 1942, but it was not until the war department started recruiting female reporters in large numbers to cover “the woman’s angle” of war, from 1943 to 1944, that women gained visibility—often as a problematic group of less qualified correspondents whose presence helped confirm fears and stereotypes, which then became the rationale that led the military to establish its first sex-based restrictions for war correspondents, which were a setback for all women.²⁵

And yet most historians take a similar shortcut, lumping together all female reporters who wrote about war while explaining away any barriers these women faced as sex discrimination. Certainly, all of their roles were valuable, and anyone covering war accepted a great risk. But why not tell the whole story—the value, risk, and challenges that were unique to each role?

Well-Worn Paths and Other Opportunities

It is important to note that justifiable reasons for some of these problems exist. Truly equal or objective treatment of sources is both impossible and undesirable, for reasons historians have long since established. An errant assumption of objectivity led to women being excluded from much of journalism history in the first place, and thus a biased approach, focusing on women, was necessary to begin telling a more complete story. Catherine Covert and Carolyn Kitch made these points very well in essays that should be essential readings for all journalism historians and are well worth revisiting if you have not read them lately.²⁶

The earliest histories of war correspondents were written by men and about men for the most part. If these historians mentioned women at all, they seemed to rely on the few memorable anecdotes they knew, without investigating further. The few women who first set out to write the history of women war correspondents were former journalists whose goal was to make these women visible, give them a voice, and share the most compelling stories with general audiences. These works are invaluable for the stories they tell and the experiences they uncover, but it is important to realize they are not exhaustive and that they, too, were products of their times and of the resources available to them.

²⁵Edy, *The Woman War Correspondent*.

²⁶Catherine L. Covert, “Journalism History and Women’s Experience: A Problem in Conceptual Change,” *Journalism History* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 2–6.; Carolyn Kitch, “Rethinking Objectivity in Journalism and History: What Can We Learn from Feminist Theory and Practice?” *American Journalism* (Spring 1999): 113–20.

And yet so many histories of women in journalism have cited these sources as though they were objective, comprehensive accounts. In fact, that assumption led to one of the most common reactions I heard at every stage of my research, before and after its publication: Why tackle a topic that has already been studied? The first incentive I had was the fact that the more I read about war correspondents in general and female war correspondents in particular, the more questions I had. My questions often were outside the scope of the works, and therefore might not have mattered to their authors, but they intrigued me nonetheless. The second spark I had for digging into a topic that others had already checked off as complete was learning about the fascinating work by Mary Beth Norton to correct and expand the record on the Salem witch trials and reading her essay "Finding the Devil in the Details of the Salem Witchcraft Trials," in which Norton described other people's surprise when she first embarked on the study of such a well-worn subject.²⁷ Norton's approach was revolutionary, and thus so were her findings. My approach to the history of female war correspondents, on the other hand, was conservative by comparison. And yet I did discover answers to many questions I had not seen answered before, while finding new answers to questions many of us assumed had been fully answered long ago.

We should not hesitate to reconsider all our sources, to see which secondary sources are based on other incomplete or flawed records, to move closer toward getting the whole story and getting it right. We need to make it clearer to readers what we cannot be certain about. We should not be afraid to be tentative and should, instead, raise questions for readers wherever we find them, pointing out possibly problematic sources as future research opportunities. Most importantly, however, and maybe most exciting, is the idea that no story has been fully told, and every story stands to benefit from yet another look.

²⁷Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2002); and Mary Beth Norton, "Finding the Devil in the Details of the Salem Witchcraft Trials," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 21, 2000.