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Obituary: Clare Hollingworth

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Clare Hollingworth was the war correspondent who broke the news that German troops were poised to invade Poland at the start of World War Two.

She went on to report on conflicts across the world but it was that moment that defined her career.

She was by no means the first female war reporter, but her depth of technical, tactical and strategic insight set her apart.

And, even as she approached her 11th decade, she still kept her passport by her bed in case she should be called to another assignment.

Clare Hollingworth was born in Leicester on 10 October 1911 and spent most of her childhood on a farm. What should have been idyllic years were overshadowed by World War One.

"I remember the German bombers flying over the farm we lived in to bomb Loughborough," she reminisced. "And the next day we got Polly the pony and took the trap into Loughborough to see the damage they had done. "

She had set her heart on a writing career early on, much to the exasperation of her mother.



Image copyright Getty Images Image caption British authorities did not believe the German army had entered Poland

"She didn't believe anything journalists wrote and thought they were only fit for the tradesmen's entrance."

After school she attended a domestic science college in Leicester, which instilled in her a lifelong hatred of housework.

More interesting to her by far were the battlefield tours that her father arranged to sites as diverse as Naseby, Poitiers and Agincourt.

Eschewing the prospect of life as a country squire's wife, Hollingworth became a secretary at the League of Nations Union before studying at London University's School of Slavonic Studies and the University of Zagreb.

Tension

In 1936 she married a fellow League of Nations worker, Vandeleur Robinson, but soon found herself in Warsaw, distributing aid to refugees who had fled from the Sudetenland, the Czech territory occupied by the Nazis in 1938.

She had written the occasional article for the New Statesman and, on a brief visit to London in August 1939, she was signed up by the editor of the Daily Telegraph, Arthur Wilson, who was impressed by her experience in Poland.

In this period of heightened tension, the border between Poland and Germany was sealed to all but diplomatic vehicles. After borrowing a car from the British consul in Katowice and proudly displaying the union jack, she drove through the exclusion zone and into Germany.



Image copyright [Clare Hollingworth Collection](#) Image caption She had a deep knowledge of military strategy

While driving back to Poland, having bought wine, torches and as much film as possible, she passed through a valley in which huge hessian screens had been erected.

As the wind blew one of the screens back, it revealed thousands of troops, together with tanks and artillery, all facing the Polish border.

Her report featured on the front page of the Daily Telegraph on 29 August, 1939. Less than a week after becoming a full-time journalist, she had scooped one of the biggest stories of the 20th Century.

Three days later, Hollingworth saw the German tanks rolling into Poland. But when she phoned the secretary at the British Embassy in Warsaw, he told her it could not be true as negotiations between Britain and Germany were still continuing.

Parachute jumps

"So I hung the telephone receiver out of the window," Hollingworth later recalled, "So he could listen to the Germans invading."

Working on her own, often behind enemy lines, with nothing more than a toothbrush and a typewriter, she witnessed the collapse of Poland before moving to Bucharest, where she realised that her marriage was over.

"I thought that for me - and in a different kind of way for him - my career was more important than trying to rush back home," she reflected later.



Image copyright Getty Images Image caption Her story about the spy Kim Philby was blocked by The Guardian

Hollingworth spent a busy war in Turkey, Greece and Cairo. When Montgomery - who could not stomach the idea of a woman reporting from the front - captured Tripoli in 1943, he ordered her to return to Cairo.

She decided to attach herself to Eisenhower's forces, then in Algiers.

Though diminutive and bespectacled, Hollingworth was as tough as nails. She learned how to fly and made a number of parachute jumps.

During the latter part of the war, she reported from Palestine, Iraq and Persia, where she interviewed the young Shah.

Third man

After the war, Hollingworth, by now working for the Observer and the Economist, married Geoffrey Hoare, the Times's Middle East correspondent.

The couple were just 300 yards from Jerusalem's King David Hotel when it was bombed in 1946, killing 91 people.

The attack left her with a hatred of the man behind the attack, the Irgun leader Menachem Begin, who eventually became prime minister of Israel and won the Nobel Peace Prize.

"I would not shake a hand with so much blood on it," she explained.



Image copyright **AFP** Image caption She celebrated her 100th birthday in her adopted home of Hong Kong

In 1963 Hollingworth was working for the Guardian in Beirut when Kim Philby, a correspondent for the Observer, disappeared.

She was convinced that he was the fabled "third man" in a British spy ring that already included Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean.

After some detective work, she discovered that Philby had left on a Soviet ship bound for Odessa and filed copy to that effect with the Guardian.

But this second huge scoop was spiked by the paper's editor, Alastair Hetherington, who feared a libel suit.

Three months later, the Guardian ran the story, tucked away on an inside page. The following day the Daily Express splashed it on the front page, prompting the government to admit that Philby had, indeed, defected to the Soviet Union.

Venerated

Hollingworth reported on the Algerian crisis and the Vietnam War. She was one of the first journalists to predict that American military muscle would not prevail and that a stalemate was inevitable.

She made a special effort to speak to Vietnamese civilians, away from the watching eyes of the US PR people, to ensure she accurately captured the views of those who were suffering the most.

Hoare died in 1966, and Hollingworth, who had become the Telegraph's first Beijing correspondent in 1973, retired to Hong Kong in 1981.

She spent her final years in the former colony and was a daily fixture at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, venerated by her colleagues.

Although she lost her sight later in life, Clare Hollingworth, a true journalist's journalist, retained an acute interest in world affairs right to the end.

She was once asked where she would want to go if the phone rang with a new assignment.

"I would look through the papers," she said, "And say, 'Where's the most dangerous place to go?', because it always makes a good story."

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