



# Fearless Reporting

Robert Richardson, ASC and director Matthew Heineman take a documentary-style approach to framing a courageous journalist's undertakings in war-torn regions.

By Patricia Thomson



“There is always a story at the end of a rocket,” Marie Colvin once said. That’s what lured the American-born British *Sunday Times* war correspondent to the world’s most dangerous hot spots: Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Kosovo, Chechnya, to name a few. She kept going back after losing an eye to a grenade when covering the Tamil Tigers in 2001 in Sri Lanka. She returned even after PTSD set in,

along with its handmaiden, heavy drinking. But war reporting was her main addiction, fed by ambition, a hard work ethic, and bravery bordering on bravado. Her scoops were legendary, her interviews hard-hitting, her writing alive with details. Colvin died in 2012 during the siege of Homs, Syria.

*A Private War*, starring Rosamund Pike as Colvin and Jamie Dornan as her photographer, Paul Conroy, follows the last decade of the journalist’s life, charting her professional triumphs and personal demons. “In this day and age, where truth seems to be malleable and journalism is under attack, I thought it was an incredibly important film to make, celebrating this courageous woman, but also celebrating journalism,” says director Matthew Heineman, who teamed up with veteran cinematographer Robert Richardson, ASC, to make his narrative-feature debut.

The biopic represents a big leap for Heineman. He’d previously worked exclusively in documentary, making a name for himself with *Cartel Land* (*AC* Sept. ’15), which followed vigilante groups on both sides of the Mexican border. That



Opposite: War correspondent Marie Colvin (Rosamund Pike) witnesses the uncovering of a mass grave in Iraq — one of many real-life experiences depicted in the biopic *A Private War*. This page, left: Colvin meets photographer Paul Conroy (Jamie Dornan) while covering the war in Iraq. Below: Director Matthew Heineman (left) and cinematographer Robert Richardson, ASC.

project earned an Oscar nomination and numerous awards, including a DGA win and two big ones for cinematography — an Emmy and a Sundance prize (both of which Heineman shared with co-cinematographer Matt Porwoll). His next awards magnet was 2017’s *City of Ghosts*, which tracks a group of citizen-journalists in Raqqa, Syria.

After *Cartel Land*, the scripts poured in — but none spoke to Heineman until *A Private War*, based on Marie Brenner’s *Vanity Fair* profile. The resulting feature is also the first time the director hasn’t shot his own footage.

He found his dream partner after an unexpected phone call. “Bob’s agent called and said, ‘Would you be interested in speaking with Robert Richardson about shooting *A Private War*?’ I said, ‘Ummm, of course!’” Heineman recalls with a laugh. “It was an amazing turn of events.”

At the time, Richardson — best known for his award-winning work with Scorsese, Tarantino and Oliver Stone — was in Fiji shooting Baltasar Kormákur’s *Adrift*, so they met via Skype. “He’s sort of a documentary fanatic, so we spent most of that time talking about documentaries,” Heineman recalls. “He started out shooting documentaries, and shot, in my opinion, some of the best war



films of all time.” He’s referring to *The Front Line* — a 1982 documentary about the civil war in El Salvador — which was followed by Richardson’s war-themed scripted collaborations with Stone, first on *Salvador*, then *Platoon*, and then *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Given Richardson’s extensive feature credits — and Heineman’s own lack of them — the director thought their partnership might be “nerve-racking.” It was anything but. “There was always a warmth and brotherly camaraderie between us,” Heineman attests. “It was never like, ‘I’m Bob Richardson,

I’ve won three Oscars and been nominated for six. I’ve been doing this forever.’ No, it was always peer to peer. That’s what made it such an enjoyable experience for me.”

Richardson thinks he’s the lucky one, however. “Matt is incredibly impassioned,” the cinematographer attests. “It’s so clear in his documentary work the levels he will go to achieve a film.”

In many respects, Heineman didn’t intend for *A Private War* to be particularly different from his documentary work. He wanted the visuals to stay on the ground with Colvin, fully

Unit photography by Keith Bernstein. Additional photography by Paul Conroy. All images courtesy of Aviron Pictures.



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Above: Colvin enters the Sri Lankan jungle. Right and below: Cast and crew continue the Sri Lanka sequence — which was actually shot in Jordan — after sunset.

immersed in her world. “My goal is to humanize stories,” he says. “Obviously, this is in the form of a narrative film, but the goal is the same: to help people understand what someone like Marie Colvin goes through, but also the experience and horrors of war and what that does to somebody.” To that end, he continues, “I tried to bring my documentary aesthetic to the film’s look and ethos. We wanted to make it feel ‘docu-like,’ and as pure and honest as possible. That was my North Star at every step along the way, whether it was casting, shooting, acting or costumes.”

The 38-day shoot took place in London — as well as in numerous locations in Jordan, which stood in for Sri Lanka, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. The plan was to go lean and lightweight, and cover the war zones mostly with handheld camera and Steadicam. They decided upon a package from Arri Rental U.K. that primarily included two Alexa Minis, with an occasional third Mini for action sequences. An Alexa XT was used for a portion of the production.

After considering the use of an Alexa 65 to distinguish the London scenes, they ultimately stuck with a single format. Except for action sequences, the production was largely a single-camera shoot. The Mini units recorded 3.4K ArriRaw in Open Gate mode, with the frame cropped to 2.39:1 for a 2K release. They recorded to 256GB CFast 2.0 memory cards, and backed up on set using a Codex Media Vault.

To allow Richardson to stay light on his feet and shoot documentary-style, the Mini was often stripped down to its bare essentials — lens and pistol grip — while battery, transmitter and additional lenses were tucked inside a backpack carried by 1st AC Peter Byrne and 2nd AC Kat Spencer. “We had [Arri/Zeiss] Super Speed MKII and Standard Speed primes, which are quite small, that I just carried in a box,” Byrne says. “I had two boxes in my backpack, so I had all the lenses and could go anywhere.” The 1st AC is also quick to note, “Without Kat backing me up, I couldn’t have done the job.”

That glass also facilitated another doc-inspired goal. “I tried to emulate natural light as much as possible, and not light where it was not necessary,” Richardson says. “I wanted the speed for night.” Night scenes often had the lens wide open, with the camera’s ISO set to 1,600 or even 2,000, giving the filmmakers the wherewithal to light by flashlight, firelight or computer screen.

But the real workhorses, especially in Jordan, were two compact handheld zooms — an Angenieux Optimo 15-40mm and a 28-76mm (both T2.6). “They mostly came out of my experience on *Adrift*, which was almost all handheld zooms, and that came out of *World War Z*, actually,” Richardson notes.

“Those two were really our go-to’s, because they were lightweight and gave us the flexibility to grab lots of shots quickly,” Byrne says. “It sounds silly, but not having to keep changing lenses makes a massive difference, especially when you’re in those dusty environments.” Rounding out the package was a 12x Optimo 24-290mm (T2.8), which lived on the B camera.

The material was monitored in Rec 709. “DIT Alex Golding was on set to check that there was no damage to the cards, which were sent twice daily to [Shed colorist] Fergus Hally to begin grading, when possible,” Richardson says. “Fergus was set up in a room next to editorial in a hotel in Jordan [where] the crew was [staying].” The director carried a handheld monitor, and another was tucked away for the rest of the team. Heineman notes, “We occasionally [had] a video village with monitors — not every day, though.”

Byrne adds, “In many of these locations, we wanted to be able to shoot 360 degrees, so that meant leaving a minimum amount of equipment around.” That was especially true in the desert’s wide-open spaces, where the camera truck, catering and everything else had to be miles away; small essentials were hidden behind rocks.

With only five days budgeted for the final grade, Richardson faithfully stayed on top of grading dailies. “I knew



Top: On location in Jordan, Steadicam operator Shaun Copley frames the action from behind Dornan, while shooting a scene set in Afghanistan. Above: Dornan confers with the real-life Conroy, who served as a consultant on the production.

that if we didn’t grade it ahead of time, you’d walk into a final with weeks of work,” he says.

“Bob came up with this look for the film that he applied in the dailies, which had a burned-out, bleached look for the war zones and a much more cool-blue look for London,” says Heineman. “We pulled that back a bit in the final, but there’s definitely a different feel to the home front and the war front.”

Colorist Matt Watson performed the final grade with FilmLight Baselight v5 at Shed in London. Watson graded the London dailies as well, while Hally handled dailies in Jordan.

Throughout the shoot, Richardson placed himself where he felt most natural: behind the camera. “Every movie I’ve ever shot, I’ve operated. Whether or not I had to pay for an operator, the majority of shots in my career are mine,” he says. “I’m not just a director of photography who watches monitors. Without operating, I’m not able to see, I don’t know how to light — and principally, I don’t know how to have a relationship with the cast. I have to look into their eyes.”

This was the second consecutive production, following *Adrift*, on which Richardson had the camera mostly on



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Heineman trains his eyes skyward as Richardson sits atop a Grip Factory Munich GF-16 camera crane.



his shoulder. “As a cameraman, I’m instinctive — or it’s what I attempt to achieve when operating,” he says. “To shoot a film in this vérité manner was a joy — a liberation of sorts, you might say. Having just done back-to-back features primarily in this manner, I realized that a precision of composition and quality of lighting would be lost, but that loss was a gain for the authenticity we were attempting to achieve. A loss is not always a loss. The goal was to be vérité in style, and I did not want a tailored image that felt false to reality, nor did Matt. This extended to how we approached the DI — to leave what we captured on the screen and not clean it up to the level one would normally attempt. That was not easy for me to do as a cinematographer.”

On Steadicam and the occasional B camera was Shaun Cobley. And though the director himself pitched in to operate a few shots, Heineman — as difficult as it might have been — essentially let go of the dual role of director-operator that he was accustomed to, since he “obviously trusted and appreciated Bob’s skill,” the director says. “It’s amazing how fast Bob can move. When we’re not shooting [scenes], he’s always capturing little ‘documentary’ moments

and cutaways, helping to bring that location to life, especially in war zones.”

One scene in which those ingredients come together in a powerful way is when Colvin and Conroy witness the uncovering of a mass grave in Iraq — proof of Saddam Hussein’s atrocities. Villagers gather to watch a bulldozer dig in the sand. An argument between Colvin and Iraqi police flares up, but it’s interrupted by the wails of women after a skull is unearthed. Close-ups follow: hands pulling body parts out of the sand, Colvin’s anguished face, burka-clad widows grieving.

“That was basically shot in real time,” the director says, “from morning till night, using the trajectory of the sun to dictate the scene. It was predominantly handheld — Bob at his best.” The sequence was captured entirely under natural light.

During that long day, Richardson relied on a dependable ally — backlight. “If you’re going to shoot a sequence, backlight allows you the most affordable way to continue a day from various angles and [have the footage] appear to [take place] at the same time,” he says.

Gaffer Mark Taylor elaborates, “After we had recce’d this location, we sat down and made detailed graphs and

charts, and plotted where the sun was going to be at any given time. For every setup, we always shot towards the sun. When the sun was at its highest, Bob would move in and do lower and wider shots, because that’s when the light was at its least flattering. As the sun was near the end of the day and we were down in the grave, we used the supporting artists gathered around the grave as a ‘flag,’ essentially, with the sun behind them, which in turn created a natural negative fill inside the grave itself.”

At various points, Richardson pressed the 12x lens into service and picked off shots of the people looking on.

During the digging, “there had to be 40 or 50 shots I did in a very documentary way — hands, faces, gestures, left, right,” the cinematographer says. Byrne attests that by the end of the day, “we had a record number of shots — well over 100, and probably double that.”

But what sticks in everyone’s mind is the raw emotion of the day. Heineman made a point of hiring nonprofessional extras from the countries being depicted, so in this case, they came from Iraq. Richardson recalls, “There were these women who had gone through something akin to this,



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Top and middle: Crewmembers keep pace with Pike while carrying a length of speed rail that supports the underslung camera. Above: Richardson hand-holds the camera for an exterior that takes place in Iraq.

and they started crying and wailing and calling out their past.” Indeed, a chant of mourning broke out, unprompted by the director. “It was complicated to shoot, because you are literally in the midst of a docu experience,” the cinematographer adds. “I shot it as if I was a documentary filmmaker. I tried to capture their experiences, but also Rosamund’s and Jamie’s.” The director notes, “I think that energy we felt on the day is translated to the screen.”

Adding to the reality quotient was Paul Conroy himself — a constant presence on the Jordanian locations. The war photographer and Heineman had become friends after Conroy hosted a screening for *City of Ghosts*. On *A Private War*, Conroy was “integral in preproduction and in bringing authenticity to the script,” the director says. Conroy then came on board as an official consultant during production. His presence led to some emotional encounters. “During the Syria sequences, our stunt man and one of our extras came up to Paul, having recognized him from the media center in Homs, where Marie died,” says Heineman. “He was an amazing inspiration to everyone. We were telling a real story, and here’s this guy who actually lived through it, helping us do so.”

The decimated city of Homs was a key location for the final sections of the movie. It was also a rare case of the production staying put for a week — as prior to this, company moves had usually come once or twice a day. The stand-in for Homs was discovered by Heineman when he was en route to the airport during an early scout in Jordan. It was a derelict construction site with a dozen or so four-story apartment buildings, abandoned before the outer walls had gone up. “It had this amazing energy and a scary, haunting emptiness to it,” Heineman recalls. “Literally, I knew right then I wanted to shoot Homs there.”

“When we all saw it, we thought Matt was insane,” Richardson says. “There are literally just concrete foundations that are empty, nothing within.



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Right: Conroy waits out an attack in Homs, Syria. Below: The photographer documents a group of women and children trying to flee the siege of Homs. Bottom: An explosion erupts in front of Colvin and Conroy. An abandoned construction site in Jordan served as stand-in for the decimated city of Homs.



There were no streetlights, no electricity. But Matt had this confidence. He saw it in his head, and he created it.”

Production designer Sophie Becher dressed the exteriors with rubble, and turned interior parts into sets for the Homs media center and FSA safe house, the widows’ basement hideaway, the makeshift medical clinic, and a bombed-out version of Colvin’s bedroom as seen in her nightmares. “It took two weeks to put in the power cable and dimming-control systems,” the gaffer says. “Bob wanted the site to feel like there were still people living there, hiding out amongst the chaos and ruins. We used sodium fixtures on some of the buildings, and the same fixtures on the floor around the rubble of the bombed buildings, as though there were still some electrical power remaining. We also used some fluorescent fittings in broken and damaged signs on shop fronts, bare practical bulbs in some of the windows, and small clusters of flickering festoons deep in the back of the buildings to give us points of light. The main sequence of entering Homs at night was predominantly lit by special-effects fires and explosions, and flame bars strategically placed in key points within the sequence.”

In general, Richardson says, “we had an extremely small HMI package and tungsten package in Jordan.” Daylight ranged from 18Ks to M8s, and tungsten from 12-light Dinosaurs to 150-watt Dedolights, fleshed out with an array of 100-watt practical bulbs. “Basically, when we went to Jordan, Bob’s idea was to not light anything, just to control what we had,” Taylor says. “All the night interiors are predominantly lit with practicals. We just wanted to make it as natural and real as possible.”

Production lights came from two rental houses in Jordan, supplemented by a container from PMBS Lighting outside London, which also supplied the U.K. half of the shoot. Among the items shipped were Aladdin kits, LED kits and ribbons, and various textiles.

Lighting Homs interiors required some dexterity. For the bare-bones



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Richardson and Heineman study a monitor while working on a day-exterior scene in Jordan. "There was always a warmth and brotherly camaraderie between us," the director says of the collaboration. "It was always peer to peer. That's what made it such an enjoyable experience for me."



media center, where Colvin filed her stories and did a final live feed to broadcasters, "we designed a lighting system from reference photos that looked very improvised, but was actually quite sophisticated," Taylor says. "[Electrician] Jason Reynier worked alongside the production-design team and our local rigging gaffer, Ezz Islam, to install cabling, which led back to a dimming system that gave us control of every practical lamp in the control room. To enhance the light emitted from the computer screens, we used 12-volt and 24-volt LED tape stuck onto the screens. To enable that, my best boy, Danny Griffiths, had to find a specialist electronics shop that could manufacture specific 12-volt and 24-volt batteries to power the LED tape. We also used a number of Aladdin Eye-Lites."

At its most minimal, lighting in Homs involved only flashlights or fire. Such was the case with the re-creation of the abandoned storm drain that ran under the city, which the rebels would use to access their hideaway. The Jordan-based stand-in was a Roman-era water tunnel in Umm Qais, which is carved out of limestone 5 meters underground. "The logistics in that tunnel were horrendous, because there were no radios working," says Byrne. And as the tunnel was barely wide enough to accommodate the width of a human being, Richardson notes that "it proved exceedingly difficult" to shoot there with

either Steadicam or the cinematographer's handheld camera.

To light the coming and going of rebels and reporters through the tunnel, "Danny sourced every [available] flashlight in Jordan," the gaffer says. "Also, one of my floor sparks from the U.K. brought some of our own powerful LED flashlights to Jordan in his luggage. Flashlights were our primary light in the tunnel, along with carefully placed special-effects flame bars and fires. We also used some [Arri] SkyPanel S60s bounced above the tunnel [and] back through small tented holes above to create one small area of moonlight."

For much of the movie, the camera stays close to Colvin. One powerful shot breaks this rule, however: the opening and closing view of Homs in ruins. Both veering from the documentary ethos and incorporating visual effects, the shot begins with the camera looking down at the rubble around the media center after Colvin and Conroy have been hit by an RPG. The camera then rises, moving past the bombed-out building and finally tipping upward to reveal the whole city — a landscape of smoking destruction that stretches for miles.

"That shot is very symbolic for me," the director attests. "You never really get to see the devastation, given how we shot the film. It's always through Marie's perspective — you're racing between buildings, you're driving

through the streets, it's dark. So this was an opportunity to pull out and see this utter, horrific devastation that surrounded her.

"Due to various constraints, it became apparent that it couldn't be all drone, and it couldn't be all crane," Heineman continues. The shot thus began with a Grip Factory Munich GF-16 crane carrying the Mini and 25mm Super Speed. Then a heavy-lifter drone took over, and captured "basically everything 30 feet above the pull-up and out of the buildings, and the tilt up," the director notes. Sunlight was controlled on the crane shot using 20'x20' frames "skinned with unbleached muslin and rigged to a couple of Manitou Telehandlers," Taylor notes.

Because the hero location was surrounded by desert, it was clear from the outset that a visual-effects solution would be needed once the camera rose above the lower dressed floors. A combination of CGI and matte paintings came into play, all based on reference footage and still photos of Homs shot in Syria.

"Bashar al-Assad is still assailing a generation of human beings," Richardson says of the enduring relevance of Colvin's story. "Colvin spoke out about it, but it's still taking place. She died giving her voice." The cinematographer puts her in a class with Margaret Bourke-White, Martha Gellhorn, Christiane Amanpour, Clarissa Ward and Zeina Khodr — chroniclers of the travesties of their day. "In this time, we need Marie. We need her desperately, and that's why I feel it's an important film." ●

## TECHNICAL SPECS

2.39:1

Digital Capture

Arri Alexa Mini, Alexa XT

Arri/Zeiss Super Speed;  
Angenieux Optimo





*American*  
**Cinematographer**

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# THE FAVOURITE

ROBBIE RYAN, BSC, ISC  
AND DIRECTOR  
YORGOS LANTHIMOS  
BRING FRESH  
PERSPECTIVE TO  
COSTUME DRAMA

SAYOMBHU MUKDEEPROM  
**SUSPIRIA**

ROBERT RICHARDSON, ASC  
**A PRIVATE WAR**

ERIC STEELBERG, ASC  
**THE FRONT RUNNER**

**PLUS:**  
**WIDOWS**  
SEAN BOBBITT, BSC  
AND DIRECTOR STEVE MCQUEEN

