

# Iraqi doctors say rescue of Lynch was exaggerated

**Hugh Dellios and E.A. Torriero**  
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

**NASIRIYAH, Iraq** — Despite her pain and fear, Jessica Lynch sipped juice and ate biscuits under the watchful eye of Iraqi doctors and nurses who shielded her from thugs during her eight days of captivity in an Iraqi hospital in March.

On her last night there, when she would hide beneath her sheets as the sounds of battle erupted, everyone at the hospital knew that the feared Iraqi Fedayeen fighters had fled by the time U.S. Special Forces troops arrived to rescue her.

Nonetheless, over the next 24 hours, the world would be introduced to Lynch as a plucky heroine who had "fiercely" fought off her Iraqi captors before being rescued in a daring raid by commandos who purportedly snatched her from the clutches of Saddam Hussein's nastiest henchmen. Her limb fractures were reported as "multiple gunshot wounds."

It was the stuff of legend, nourished by myth.

The story of Jessica Lynch is the tale of how a modern war icon is made, and perhaps how easily officials and journalists with different agendas accepted contradictory, self-serving versions of what happened to her.

Seven weeks after her dramatic rescue marked a turning point in the public relations campaign of the Iraq war, a return to Nasiriyah raises questions about the telling of her story, and about the roles of the Pentagon and the U.S. news media in turning the petite 19-year-old Army private from West Virginia into the face of good battling evil in the Iraq war.

The final story has not been told, and no one contests Lynch's brav-

ery during a horrifying ordeal. But the Iraqi doctors who treated her tell a less Hollywood-ready version of her rescue: They say they worked hard to save her life, they deny reports that she was slapped by an Iraqi officer and they say there was no resistance when the U.S. forces raided the building.

"The Americans were jumping over fences and running around," said Hassan Hamoud, who lives nearby. "They could have walked into the hospital and no one would have stopped them."

The Pentagon insists it did not embellish the Lynch tale when it first announced the rescue at its Central Command headquarters in Doha, Qatar. But a few targeted whispers to reporters by anonymous U.S. officials — about Lynch's "to-the-death" gun battle before she was captured, her supposed gunshot wounds and her mistreatment at the hospital — set the plate for a feast by television networks and newspapers that could not resist such a made-for-TV plot.

"I recognized the pattern: She was being made into an important symbol," said Robert Ivie, an expert in communication, culture and the rhetoric of war at Indiana University. "She stood for the narrative that the Bush administration was telling."

Ultimately, Lynch may not be able help sort out the real story: Doctors say she has lost her memory, at least about the incidents that put her into the Iraqi hospital.

For the past several weeks, British and Canadian journalists have been casting doubts on the Pentagon's version of the Lynch rescue. An intensely skeptical television documentary aired last week by the British Broadcasting Corp.

alleged that the affair was, in the words of the presenter, "one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived."

Pentagon officials say any suggestion that the Lynch rescue was concocted, or that U.S. commanders would send troops into the path of danger solely for a publicity stunt, is "ridiculous." They blame any exaggerations on the media.

In its handling of the story, the Pentagon was taking its cues from the White House, which had dispatched a former Bush election campaign official to the CENTCOM base in Doha to manage the daily briefings to 700 journalists at a media center with a specially built, \$250,000 stage.

Lynch's April 1 rescue came at a critical time. Field commanders were expressing surprise at the Iraqi resistance, and Lynch went missing during one of a number of ambushes that gave the impression that the U.S. advance was bogging down. That day's newspaper front pages featured a disturbing story of how U.S. soldiers wiped out an entire Iraqi family at a road checkpoint.

Just after midnight on April 2, CENTCOM summoned journalists back to the base and, after a several-hour wait, informed them about the first successful rescue mission of an American POW since World War II.

The next day — the drama enhanced by night-vision video footage shot by the rescue team — Brig. Gen. Vincent Brooks described the mission as "a classic operation, done by some of our nation's finest warriors, who are dedicated to never leaving a comrade behind."

"There was not a firefight inside of the building, I will tell you, but there were firefights outside of the building, getting in and getting out," Brooks said, describing how the hospital had been converted into an Iraqi paramilitary base.

Seven weeks later, the staff at Saddam Hussein Hospital in Nasiriyah tell a much more subdued story about the dangers Lynch faced and how she was rescued.

Harith al-Houssona, an Iraqi doctor, said Iraqi soldiers brought Lynch into the hospital with a broken right arm, fractures of both legs, a dislocated right ankle and a finger-long gash in her head — all wounds he said were common in road accident victims.

"There was never a bullet wound," said al-Houssona, who operated on Lynch to install a metal plate in her leg. "It's a myth if (someone said) there was."

The staff also dismiss as false a well-publicized story told by an Iraqi lawyer about how he had seen a dark-clad man slapping Lynch in her hospital bed.

The lawyer, who claimed to have sneaked in and spoken to Lynch, was credited with saving Lynch's life after alerting U.S. soldiers to her whereabouts. He has since been given asylum in the United States, a book contract and a job offer in Washington.

"I never saw any strangers near Jessica," said Furat Hussein, one of the nurses. "She was never mistreated."

At the hospital, the doctors, nurses and drivers have not seen the dramatic reports about how Lynch was saved. They just wish for some acknowledgment of how they helped her.

"Just a thank you," said Hannon, the second ambulance driver. "That would make us very happy."

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He came to my car window at the stop sign. He screamed that if he saw me kissing a guy in his neighborhood again, he would kill me. He told me I was disgusting. When I saw my father at home I had to explain to him why I was crying. "Disgusting," he said. Years later, my six-year-old cousin said to me, "My father says you're disgusting." I replied, "Your father's wrong."

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