

Using Private Lynch: The making of a myth

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Jessica Lynch resists America's desire to call her a war hero. "They used me as a way to symbolize all this stuff," Lynch told Diane Sawyer during a television interview on Veteran's Day. "It's wrong."

Lynch grew up in Palestine, West Virginia, a town of 350 people with only one place to shop: "The What-Not Store." She joined the army because jobs were scarce, the recruiter told her she would be able to travel (she wanted to see an ocean), and the army promised to provide financial help for college. As a supply clerk at Fort Bliss, Texas, she thought she would soon be transferred to Hawaii. No such luck. She went to Iraq with the 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company.

In the first week of the war, her unit got lost and was ambushed. Her Humvee ran into another vehicle, killing the four people with her and leaving Lynch badly hurt. She was captured by Iraqi forces, treated in an Iraqi military hospital, and then removed by U.S. forces from a civilian hospital. Now she is home, struggling to regain use of her broken body and heal her wounded psyche.

Seven months after the accident, according to *Time*, Lynch labors to walk 40 steps with the aid of a therapist. Otherwise she hobbles on two crutches or uses a wheelchair. Nerve damage does not allow her to control her bladder or bowels.

Her true story has come out in pieces. For one thing, the Iraqi military's quick delivery of Lynch to the hospital probably saved her life. A night-vision film of her rescue shows that U.S. soldiers encountered only medical personnel.

All indications are that Lynch was well treated by doctors, even though they were swamped with wounded soldiers and civilians. She lay on the hospital's only special bed designed to ease pressure on broken limbs. A nurse—who said Lynch cried constantly—rubbed her back with talcum powder and sang Arabic lullabies to her. Part of the blood Lynch received was donated by hospital staff. And—speaking of

heroics—an Iraqi doctor tried to deliver her to an American compound two days before the rescue effort, only to be driven away by gunfire from U.S. soldiers who apparently feared an ambulance bomb.

This story wasn't told. Instead, only nine days after she was removed from the hospital, a heroic tale was communicated. The *Washington Post*, citing "an official government source," reported that Lynch had gone down fighting, shooting several Iraqis and suffering bullet and stab wounds. "She was fighting to the death," the source said. "She did not want to be taken alive." None of that was true, but Americans ate it up.

The Jessica myth was the product of careful planning. The *Guardian* reported May 15 that in the early hours of the morning after Lynch's return, reporters were called to the central command in Iraq and told that the president and secretary of defense had been briefed. The reporters were presented with a carefully edited five-minute video of the "rescue."

Six weeks later the BBC called the exercise "one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived. It provides insight into the real influence of Hollywood producers on Pentagon media managers and has provided a template from which America hopes to present its future wars."

The hoopla around Lynch has been staggering. During Veteran's Day week, the media scrapped over her. A radio ad urged us to see Jessica Lynch on television's *Entertainment Tonight*. "They said Jessica Lynch did not remember her captivity. Well, they were wrong. Hear her story on *Prime Time* with Diane Sawyer," said another radio plug. *Variety* reported that the interview was a great "get" for Sawyer, with 16 million people watching the 90-minute interview on ABC. Sawyer's conversation with entertainer Britney Spears netted only 11.4 million. Lynch also appeared on NBC with Katie Couric and CBS with David Letterman ("The first late-night interview with Jessica Lynch").

Parade magazine put her on its cover with the headline "The Pledge Will Never Be Just Words for Me." She was on the cover of *Time*, which devoted 22 pages to her story. *Glamour* handed out "Women of the Year" awards and Lynch stole the headlines, although she shared honors with, among others, Twyla Tharp, Ellen DeGeneres, Jessica Lange and Shoshana Johnson, the African-American woman POW shown as a captive by Iraqi television and held for two weeks longer than Lynch.

Knopf released 500,000 copies of *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, as written by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Rick Bragg.

More than 15 million people watched the two-hour NBC docudrama *Saving Private Lynch*. It was straightforward and did not exaggerate, limiting itself to the ambush, the crash, the hospital and the hospital raid. The script was based on the story of Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief, the Iraqi lawyer who played a role in freeing Lynch. In the absence of information from Lynch, his book—*Because Each Life Is Precious: Why an Iraqi Man Came to Risk Everything for Pvt. Jessica Lynch*—was the key document.

Al-Rehaief was given asylum in the U.S. for his efforts, but Lynch and others dispute many of his claims. Did he embroider his role, as a nurse from the Iraqi hospital has said? He writes that he told Lynch he would get her out, but Lynch said she never met him. Did he, as his book and the docudrama suggest, see a black-robed Fayedeen officer slap Lynch repeatedly in her hospital bed? Lynch and hospital doctors say that did not happen. Was his wife a nurse in Lynch's hospital? Hospital authorities say no one with her name worked there. Surely it's telling that when al-Rehaief and his family were feted in West Virginia by the citizens of Palestine in October, Lynch did not show up.

The media attention might have overwhelmed even a healthy, sophisticated person. It appeared to flatten Lynch. After her big week, she suddenly returned home, canceling a book-signing tour, a visit on CNN with Larry King and a one-hour interview with NPR.

"I am not a hero. I am a survivor," she told Sawyer. But Americans aren't listening. They insist on calling Jessica Lynch a hero. Certainly the supply clerk deserves our sympathy. But in the search for heroes, we should focus on the people who feed hungry Iraqi civilians, heal the sick on both sides, and try to bring order and hope to Iraq. Some of those are soldiers. Some are not.