

## Sometimes Heroism Is a Moving Target

By Mark Bowden

So it turns out that the feel-good story of the Iraq war, the rescue of Pfc. Jessica D. Lynch, may not have the plot line of a made-for-TV movie.

It seems the plucky young private may not have fought like Rambo when her supply unit took a wrong turn into an Iraqi ambush. She may not have been shot and stabbed in that firefight, which may or may not have happened, and it seems likely now that she was not mistreated at an Iraqi hospital. Her heroic rescuers did not fight their way up the hospital halls; indeed, the hospital staff may have been eager to hand her over, had perhaps even tried to the day before, only to be turned back by skittish American soldiers at a roadblock.

If you find this series of conditional phrases annoying, welcome to the fog of war. Anyone who has ever been in a war will tell you the overriding sensation is confusion. On the ground, soldiers, journalists and civilians struggle, first, to stay alive, and, second, to figure out what is going on — because knowing what is going on is the best way to stay alive. War is about sudden, violent change, and it is always difficult to make sense of events, either from close or from afar, where generals and other journalists try to piece together reports from many places into a coherent whole. What emerges from the fog is always incomplete, and often wrong.

When the rescue story broke on April 2, information came from a public briefing and from military intelligence sources, relying on field reports from soldiers and interviews with Iraqi civilians. No journalists were present when Private Lynch was captured or rescued, so the unofficial information was all second- or third-hand. As it happens, the reports contained errors and contradictions, which have now prompted allegations that the Pentagon tried to pull a fast one.

The BBC recently aired a story by John Kampfner that claimed the Lynch story, as first reported, was part of a Pentagon conspiracy to propagandize the war. Mentioning the movie producer Jerry Bruckheimer (who made the film of my book *Black Hawk Down*), Mr. Kampfner suggested the heroic tale was invented by Pentagon spin-meisters for compliant American media.

This makes for a juicy theory, but isn't likely. For one thing, it would hardly have taken a secret plot to get the American press to make a hero out of Private Lynch, any more than it would take a plot to make a thirsty horse drink. Assembling stories out of incomplete information is what daily journalism does; indeed, it's what Mr. Kampfner has done in this case.

What happened often happens on big breaking stories, especially from a war zone. The bits and pieces of information that emerge from the fog are fit into a familiar frame.

There are two parts to this supposed propaganda coup. The first deals with Private Lynch's capture: whether she fought or was injured when her vehicle crashed. The second deals with the rescue: whether her rescuers engaged in a fierce firefight or staged the whole show, knowing they would meet no resistance.

Private Lynch, a 19-year-old supply clerk with the Army's 507th Ordinance Maintenance Company, was captured March 23, when her unit made a wrong turn near the Iraqi city of Nasiriya. Video images of dead soldiers and terrified captives from her unit were a shock to American viewers early in the conflict, when there were fears that the war effort was bogged down. Nine soldiers from her unit were killed. So Private Lynch's rescue 10 days later gave a big lift to American morale. "Saving Private Lynch" was the Big Story.

Let's take the first part of this. If the Pentagon was trying to hype the story, they did a poor job. Army spokesmen have steadfastly refused to comment on this episode, which is under investigation. Private Lynch has not been interviewed, and reportedly has no memory of the events. No one from the military has made any effort to hide that the 507th blundered into the enemy. Though six other company members have been rescued, none has yet shed any light publicly on their capture.

Nonetheless, for days after Private Lynch's rescue, reporters scrambled for any information.

In a detailed front-page story in *The Washington Post* on April 3, Susan Schmidt and Vernon Loeb wrote that Private Lynch had fought tenaciously, sustaining gunshot and stab wounds before surrendering. The sources for the article were not in the "media management at Central Command" in Qatar, Mr. Kampfner's villain, but "Washington-based intelligence sources," Mr. Loeb said. These Washington sources were relying on intelligence reports from Iraq, typically incomplete and contradictory. Subsequent reports have indicated that the hospital staff, in trying to hide Private Lynch from Iraqi forces, had put out the story that she, like the nine others, had been killed. This is most likely the source of early reports that she had been shot and stabbed.

As for her fighting fiercely, it is a timeworn military reflex to claim that a killed or captured soldier fought bravely, whether or not it is true. It comforts the family, salutes the fallen (or captured) comrade and boosts morale. It is not surprising that this was in an intelligence report. Anyone familiar with military stories would have viewed it skeptically. "We might have, if the information was coming from the military," said Mr. Loeb, who covers the Defense Department for *The Post*, "but the sources for this information were apparently Iraqis, both Iraqi informants and intercepts."

As for Private Lynch's wounds, accounts have been conflicting. On the day of her rescue, both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* reported she had gunshot wounds. Later reports in both papers said she did not. The nature of her wounds remains unclear.

"Far from promoting stories about Lynch, the military didn't like the story," Mr. Loeb said. "They tend to be very protective of P.O.W.'s."

The second part of the story concerns the rescue, and if the Pentagon was really attempting to sell a Hollywood scenario, they fell badly short. At his briefing, Brig. Gen. Vincent K. Brooks said that Private Lynch had been "retrieved," not rescued. He showed a videotape — something Mr. Kampfner made much of — consisting of a brief muddy clip through a green night-vision lens showing Special operations soldiers carrying her on a stretcher from a Black Hawk helicopter.

This is Hollywood? If the Pentagon had wanted to manufacture a bogus firefight surely they could have done better. Mr. Bruckheimer sure would have.

In fact, General Brooks acknowledged at the first briefing that there was no resistance inside the hospital. He said there had been gunfights going in and coming out, but did not characterize them as fierce.

None of this, of course, diminishes the daring of the men who conducted the raid, who had no idea what to expect. Such Special Operations raids are designed to avoid conflict. Mr. Kampfner's report ridicules the supposed theatricality of the raiders, who shouted "Go! Go! Go!" like in the movies, who descended from helicopters, broke down doors and set off harmless (but loud) explosives and handcuffed some of those inside.

This is the way these units are trained to "take" a building, with speed and force. If everyone inside is friendly, as was apparently the case, no harm is done if the soldiers are careful, as these clearly were. But if they were walking into an ambush, or encountered armed forces, such tactics can make the difference between success or failure, life or death.

There is no doubt that the American media took these bits and pieces from the fog of war and assembled them into a heroic tale. On certain cable channels, this was done with slick packaging and great fanfare, with atmospherics borrowed from Hollywood. This is how the media works today, for better or worse. It happens without any prompting from the Pentagon; indeed, it would not have been possible for the Pentagon to stop the unspooling of "Saving Private Lynch."

It will be a while before what really happened to the ill-fated 507th is known. War is like this. Out of a great deal of violence, pain and confusion eventually emerges something more than an approximation of the truth.

Until then, we'll have to settle for the tendency to weave what little we know into a familiar shape — often one resembling the narrative arc of a film. That explains both the manufacture of "Saving Private Lynch" and Mr. Kampfner's exposé, which borrows from another movie, "Wag the Dog."

They make nice stories; the real world is foggier.

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