

## Salvaging Private Lynch

Shoring up a wartime tale that "buoyed a nation"

By Peter Hart

Military officials on April 2 gathered journalists at the press briefing center in Qatar for a major announcement. Private Jessica Lynch, an American soldier captured in Iraq and abused by Iraqi forces, had been saved by Navy SEALs in a daring nighttime raid on a hospital in Nasiriyah.

Before any of the details of this account could be independently confirmed, media painted the story in vivid colors. According to **Time** (4/14/03), the raid to save Lynch "buoyed a nation. ... Hollywood could not have dreamed up a more singular tale."

The **Washington Post** (4/13/03) reported that Lynch was "firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition" before her capture. **People** (4/21/03) talked to a "Capitol Hill source" who told them that "some of her wounds were the result of extensive torture."

**The Los Angeles Times** (4/13/03), like most other outlets, wrote about a commando raid "carried out Tuesday night in a blaze of gunfire," adding up to "a triumphant moment for U.S. forces." **Dateline NBC** (4/6/03) set the scene this way: "heavily armed Army Rangers fanned out to protect the perimeter of the hospital, taking and returning fire as Navy SEALs stormed the building itself."

It wasn't long before a handful of news outlets, in the U.S. and abroad, began challenging key aspects of the raid-reporting that Lynch, for example, far from being tortured, was actually being given medical treatment not available to Iraqis. Reports of armed opposition inside or outside the hospital were also challenged (**Washington Post**, 4/15/03; **London Times**, 4/16/03). Follow-ups appeared in the **Chicago Tribune** (5/20/03), **Associated Press** (5/28/03) and other media outlets, but a May 18 report by the **British Broadcasting Corporation** appeared to put the questions about the original story on the media radar screen.

### Saving the Pentagon?

In the wake of the critical coverage, U.S. media seemed to enter a second phase of the Lynch saga-attempting to tease out the true elements of the story while also protecting the Pentagon from criticism for spreading false stories. Knight **Ridder** correspondent Joe Galloway suggested that blame should instead go to the media (**PBS's NewsHour**, 6/10/03): "I'm afraid that it was overblown, but by the media, not by the military. I've gone through and read the transcripts of the briefings at CENTCOM headquarters, at the Pentagon, the secretary of defense's briefings. They were all very carefully understated."

NBC correspondent Jim Avila reported (5/30/03) that the stories about Lynch being shot or stabbed, or firing her weapon until she ran out of bullets, were not accurate. But he suggested that these false stories weren't the Pentagon's fault: "No one from the Pentagon ever said on the record that Jessica had fired her weapon or had been shot, but a steady stream of leaks built a dramatic and false impression."

So where did those leaks come from? The **Associated Press** (4/2/03) attributed the claims about Lynch being shot to "U.S. officials in Kuwait," and CNN's Jamie McIntyre reported (4/1/03) that he got them from "sources at the Pentagon." Avila is right that they weren't "on the record," but that hardly excuses falsehoods. In response to the claim that Lynch was harmed while at the hospital, Avila reported: "In reality, the Pentagon has never accused anyone of

mistreating Private Lynch." Except, presumably, for the anonymous Pentagon officials who said she had been shot. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (4/3/03) added to this perception of mistreatment when he cryptically noted that Lynch was "being held by Iraqi forces in what they called a hospital."

**Fox News Channel's** Bill O'Reilly took the defend-the-Pentagon stance to a bizarre and self-contradictory degree. When not directing his anger at media outlets that questioned the official line, O'Reilly was crediting military officials for at least getting some of the facts straight. Of the charge that Lynch was shot, O'Reilly explained on May 29 that the Pentagon had quieted such talk: "On April 4, a U.S. military doctor said it didn't happen. So any cover-up accusation is pure garbage." If that information was so well-known by April 4, it was slow to reach the likes of O'Reilly, who was saying two weeks after the doctor's denial (4/16/03) that Lynch "was captured when the vehicle broke down, gunshot wounds, short firelight, slapped around a little-we don't know more than that and saved by an Iraqi national."

O'Reilly also attacked media outlets that questioned the facts of Lynch's rescue: "The **Los Angeles Times** and the **BBC** and the **Toronto Star** want to destroy the fabric of this country." (No mention of the important role played in debunking the Pentagon's version by the **London Times**-a newspaper owned by O'Reilly's own employer, Rupert Murdoch)

### **Shooting the messenger**

Other reports were less hysterical, but the hostility to reporters who deflated the war's big story came through. NBC's Jim Avila (5/30/03) asked, "Has recent critical reporting about the dramatic rescue of Private Lynch gone too far?" When CNN's Leon Harris interviewed **BBC** correspondent John Kampner about his controversial Lynch report, Harris seemed amazed that the **BBC** would use an Iraqi as a source: "Are you saying that you believe a doctor, an Iraqi doctor's assessment, that the U.S. troops there were using blanks?"

Writing in the **New York Times** (6/8/03), journalist Mark Bowden took issue with the **BBC** for alleging the Lynch story was "part of a Pentagon conspiracy to propagandize the war." Given the time and resources the U.S. military put into managing wartime information, the **BBC** did not need to accuse anyone of a conspiracy-it was done out in the open. Ridiculing the **BBC** report., Bowden insisted that "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 (toes.)"

"If the Pentagon was trying to hype the story, they did a poor job," explained Bowden. "If the Pentagon had wanted to manufacture a bogus firefight surely they could have done better." Apparently the defense of the Pentagon is that it knows how to lie a little better than this.

### **What Price Glory?**

When **CNBC's** Brian Williams remarked (4/2/03) that the story of Jessica Lynch's rescue "is right out of a major motion picture," he could have been speaking on behalf of his employer. Weeks later, **NBC** was reportedly developing a TV movie tentatively titled "Saving Jessica Lynch" (**San Francisco Chronicle**, 6/3/03).

**NBC** is not the only media outlet looking to cash in on the story: The **New York Times** reported (5/9/03) that HarperCollins, a division of Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp, would pay \$500,000 for a book by Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief, the Iraqi who allegedly led U.S. forces to the hospital where Lynch was being treated.

The CBS/Viacom media empire applied synergy to the Lynch sweepstakes. A letter from **CBS News** to Lynch's representatives obtained by the **New York Times** (6/16/03) suggested using Lynch across the company's media holdings, including CBS's entertainment division and the Simon & Schuster publishing house: "From the distinguished reporting of **CBS News** to the youthful reach of MTV, we believe this is a unique combination of projects that will do justice to Jessica's inspiring story." The letter even went so far as to suggest a special MTV concert could be held in Lynch's small hometown of Palestine, West Virginia.

CBS denied any breach of ethics, with a spokesperson telling the **Associated Press** (6/16/03) that "most of the other network proposals did have some entertainment proposals or tie-in attached to them." -P H.