

## U.S. defends account of Lynch's rescue

By Jonathan S. Landay and Joseph L. Galloway

The Pentagon, under fire for allegedly stage-managing the rescue of Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch from an Iraqi hospital by U.S. troops, yesterday defended its version of events.

"The information released publicly by U.S. Central Command and the Dept. of Defense about the rescue of PFC Lynch was provided by troops and commanders who took part in, or oversaw the operation," a Pentagon statement said. "We have no reason to doubt its accuracy and we stand by those statements."

The statement was aimed at rebutting news reports that disputed the U.S. military's account of Lynch's rescue from a hospital in Nasiriyah, an incident that enthralled the nation and made her a heroine during a difficult phase of the war.

News reports have disputed the official version of the rescue, quoting Iraqi hospital doctors who said that the rescuers encountered no resistance and that Lynch's wounds were not as severe as U.S. officials described.

One report, by the British Broadcasting Corp., quoted hospital doctors as saying U.S. Special Forces fired blanks and used excessive force. It charged that the operation had been staged to buck up U.S. public morale.

Yesterday the Pentagon fired back: "Any suggestion that the events were staged or that we have been less than forthcoming about them is an insulting falsehood."

A senior military official, speaking on condition of anonymity because details of the operation remain classified, denied that it was staged or that the U.S. Navy SEALs and Army Rangers who participated had fired blanks.

Once Lynch's location was learned, "we had to move immediately with no plans and no rehearsal," he said.

The senior military official said the rescuers did encounter "minimal resistance" on the way in and out of the hospital; he did not elaborate.

"This was a deliberate military operation based on legitimate intelligence," he said. "The area was under the control of Saddam Fedayeen; the Marine Corps had not been into that area; their front line was no closer than five blocks away. We were concerned that we would have to fight our way in, rescue the hostages, and fight our way out.

"In such a situation, we go in with overwhelming force," the senior military official continued. "There was a military command post in the basement of that hospital, in clear violation" of international laws of war.

Iraqi paramilitary fighters, known as Saddam Fedayeen, captured Lynch, a 19-year-old clerk from Palestine, W. Va., in a March 22 ambush after her company took a wrong turn just outside Nasiriyah in central Iraq.

Nine U.S. soldiers died. Lynch, initially said by the U.S. military to have suffered stab and bullet wounds and fractured limbs fighting off Iraqis, was taken to the city hospital.

Eight days later, U.S. Special Forces stormed the hospital and rescued her. They also recovered the bodies of eight U.S. soldiers from the morgue.

U.S. Central Command, which oversaw the invasion of Iraq, said the rescuers engaged in firefights with Iraqis outside the hospital as they approached and left. The hospital was described as a paramilitary base.

The Pentagon rejected requests for the full, unedited video footage of the rescue filmed

by a member of the rescue party. Releasing all footage could "compromise the tactics, techniques and procedures" used by U.S. Special Forces, it said.

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