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The real 'Saving Pte. Lynch'

Iraqi medical staff tell a different story than U.S. military
'We all became friends with her, we liked her so much'

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MIDDLE EAST BUREAU

NASIRIYA, Iraq—The fog of war comes sometimes with a certain odour, and cutting through its layers, like cutting through an onion, can bring tears to the eyes.

Such is the case with what is far and away the most oft-told story of the Persian Gulf War II — the saga of Saving Private Lynch.

Branded on to our consciousness by media frenzy, the flawless midnight rescue of 19-year-old Private First Class Jessica Lynch hardly bears repeating even a month after the fact.

Precision teams of U.S. Army Rangers and Navy Seals, acting on intelligence information and supported by four helicopter gunships, ended Lynch's nine-day Iraqi imprisonment in true Rambo style, raising America's spirits when it needed it most.

All Hollywood could ever hope to have in a movie was there in this extraordinary feat of rescue — except, perhaps, the truth.

So say three Nasiriya doctors, two nurses, one hospital administrator and local residents interviewed separately last week in a Toronto Star investigation.

The medical team that cared for Lynch at the hospital formerly known as Saddam Hospital is only now beginning to appreciate how grand a myth was built around the four hours the U.S. raiding party spent with them early on April Fool's Day.

And they are disappointed.

For Dr. Harith Houssona, 24, who came to consider Lynch a friend after nurturing her through the worst of her injuries, the ironies are almost beyond tabulation.

"The most important thing to know is that the Iraqi soldiers and commanders had left the hospital almost two days earlier," Houssona said. "The night they left, a few of the senior medical staff tried to give Jessica back. We carefully moved her out of intensive care and into an ambulance and began to drive to the Americans, who were just one kilometre away. But when the ambulance got within 300 metres, they began to shoot. There wasn't even a chance to tell them 'We have Jessica. Take her.'"

One night later, the raid unfolded. Hassam Hamoud, 35, a waiter at



AP PHOTO/FAMILY HANDOUT
Jessica Lynch, 19, seen in this undated photo, was one of several soldiers who went missing after their supply convoy was ambushed in southern Iraq March 24. Lynch was rescued April 1, the Pentagon confirmed.

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Nasiriya's al-Diwan Restaurant, describes the preamble, when he was approached outside his home near the hospital by U.S. Special Forces troops accompanied by an Arabic translator from Qatar.

"They asked me if any troops were still in the hospital and I said 'No, they're all gone.' Then they asked about Uday Hussein, and again, I said 'No,'" Hamoud said. "The translator seemed satisfied with my answers, but the soldiers were very nervous."

At midnight, the sound of helicopters circling the hospital's upper floors sent staff scurrying for the x-ray department — the only part of the hospital with no outside windows. The power was cut, followed by small explosions as the raiding teams blasted through locked doors.

A few minutes later, they heard a man's voice shout, "Go! Go! Go!" in English. Seconds later, the door burst open and a red laser light cut through the darkness, trained on the forehead of the chief resident.

"We were pretty frightened. There were about 40 medical staff together in the x-ray department," said Dr. Anmar Uday, 24. "Everyone expected the Americans to come that day because the city had fallen. But we didn't expect them to blast through the doors like a Hollywood movie."

Dr. Mudhafer Raazk, 27, observed dryly that two cameramen and a still photographer, also in uniform, accompanied the U.S. teams into the hospital. Maybe this was a movie after all.

Separately, the Iraqi doctors describe how the tension fell away rapidly once the Americans realized no threat existed on the premises. A U.S. medic was led to Lynch's room as others secured the rest of the three-wing hospital. Several staff and patients were placed in plastic handcuffs, including, according to Houssona, one Iraqi civilian who was already immobilized with abdominal wounds from an earlier explosion.

One group of soldiers returned to the x-ray room to ask about the bodies of missing U.S. soldiers and was led to a graveyard opposite the hospital's south wall. All were dead on arrival, the doctors say.

"The whole thing lasted about four hours," Raazk said. "When they left, they turned to us and said 'Thank you.' That was it."

The Iraqi medical staff fanned out to assess the damage. In all, 12 doors were broken, a sterilized operating theatre contaminated, and the specialized traction bed in which Lynch had been placed was trashed.

"That was a special bed, the only one like it in the hospital, but we gave it to Jessica because she was developing a bed sore," Houssona said.

What bothers Raazk most is not what was said about Lynch's rescue, so much as what wasn't said about her time in hospital.

"We all became friends with her, we liked her so much," Houssona said. "Especially because we all speak a little English, we were able to assure her the whole time that there was no danger, that she would go home soon."

Initial reports indicated Lynch had been shot and stabbed after emptying her weapon in a pitched battle when her unit, the U.S. Army's 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, was ambushed after its convoy became lost near Nasiriya.

A few days after her release, Lynch's father told reporters none of the wounds were battle-related. The Iraqi doctors are more specific. Houssona said the injuries were blunt in nature, possible stemming from a fall from her vehicle.

"She was in pretty bad shape. There was blunt trauma, resulting in compound fractures of the left femur (upper leg) and the right humerus (upper arm). And also a deep laceration on her head," Houssona said. "She took two pints of blood and we stabilized her. The cut required stitches to close. But the leg and arm injuries were more serious."

Nasiriya's medical team was going all out at this point, due to the enormous influx of casualties from throughout the region. The hospital lists 400 dead and 2,000 wounded in the span of two weeks before and during Lynch's eight-day stay.

"Almost all were civilians, but I don't just blame the Americans," Raazk said. "Many of those casualties were the fault of the *fedayeen*, who had been using people as shields and in some cases just shooting people who wouldn't fight alongside them. It was horrible."

But they all made a point of giving Lynch the best of everything, he added. Despite a scarcity of food, extra juice and cookie were scavenged for their American guest.

They also assigned to Lynch the hospital's most nurturing nurse, Khalida Shinah. At 43, Shinah has three daughters close to Lynch's age. She immediately embraced her foreign patient as one of her own.

"It was so scary for her," Shinah said through a translator. "Not only was she badly hurt, but she was in a strange country. I felt more like a mother than a nurse. I told her again and again, Allah would watch over her. And many nights I sang her to sleep."

In the first few days, Houssona said the doctors were somewhat nervous as to whether Iraqi intelligence agents would show any interest in Lynch. But when the road between Nasiriya and Baghdad fell to the U.S.-led coalition, they knew the danger had passed.

"At first, Jessica was very frightened. Everybody was poking their head in the room to see her and she said 'Do they want to hurt me?' I told her, 'Of course not. They're just curious. They've never seen anyone like you before.'

"But after a few days, she began to relax. And she really bonded with Khalida. She told me, 'I'm going to take her back to America with me.'"

Three days before the U.S. raid, Lynch had regained enough strength that the team was ready to proceed with orthopaedic surgery on her left leg. The procedure involved cutting through muscle to install a platinum plate to both ends of the compound fracture. "We only had three platinum plates left in our supply and at least 100 Iraqis were in need," Raazk said. "But we gave one to Jessica."

A second surgery, and a second platinum plate, was scheduled for Lynch's fractured arm. But U.S. forces removed her before it took place, Raazk said.

Three days after the raid, the doctors had a visit from one of their U.S. military counterparts. He came, they say, to thank them for the superb surgery.

"He was an older doctor with gray hair and he wore a military uniform," Raazk said.

"I told him he was very welcome, that it was our pleasure. And then I told him: 'You do realize you could have just knocked on the door and we would have wheeled Jessica down to you, don't you?'

"He was shocked when I told him the real story. That's when I realized this rescue probably didn't happen for propaganda reasons. I think this American army is just such a huge machine, the left hand never knows what the right hand is doing."

What troubles the staff in Nasiriya most are reports that Lynch was abused while in their case. All vehemently deny it.

Told of the allegation through an interpreter, nurse Shinah wells up with tears. Gathering herself, she responds quietly: "This is a lie. But why ask me? Why don't you ask Jessica what kind of treatment she received?"

But that is easier said than done. At the Pentagon last week, U.S. Army spokesman Lt.-Col. Ryan Yantis said the

door to Lynch remains closed as she continues her recovery at Washington's Walter Reed Army Medical Centre.

"Until such time as she wants to talk — and that's going to be no time soon, and it may be never at all — the press is simply going to have to wait."

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