

THE BATTALION



WILLIAM BOOTH • THE WASHINGTON POST

Nurse Khalida Shnan said American Jessica Lynch was "crying all the time." Shnan wept when describing how she tried to comfort Lynch by singing to her at night.

Three months later

More clues unearthed in Lynch's rescue

By Dana Priest,
William Booth and
Susan Schmidt
THE WASHINGTON POST

Jessica Lynch, the most famous soldier of the war, remains in a private room at the end of a hall on an upper floor of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, her door guarded by a military police officer.

To repair the fractures, a spinal injury and other injuries suffered during her ordeal, the 20-year-old private first class undergoes a daily round of physical therapy. But she does so alone, during the lunch hours, when other patients are not admitted.

Her father, Greg Lynch Sr., wearing a fresh T-shirt each day with a yellow ribbon pinned to his chest, rarely leaves her side, except to sleep at night. Lynch has been in the hospital now for 67 days. Her physical condition remains severe. But she also appears to suffer from wounds that cannot be seen — and the story of her capture and rescue remains only partly told.

Her family says she doesn't remember anything about her capture. U.S. military sources say she is unable — or unwilling — to say much about anything that happened to her between the morning her Army unit was ambushed and when she became fully conscious sometime later at Saddam Hussein General Hospital in Nasiriyah, Iraq.

As the world would remember, Lynch and her Army maintenance unit were ambushed in southern Iraq on the morning of March 23. Eleven of her fellow soldiers were killed; five others were taken captive and later freed. Blond and waiflike, Lynch was taken prisoner and held separately for nine days before a dramatic nighttime rescue from her hospital bed by a covert U.S. Special Operations unit, Task Force 20.

Initial news reports, including those in The Washington Post, which cited unnamed U.S. officials with access to intelligence reports, described Lynch emptying her M-16 into Iraqi soldiers. The intelligence reports from intercepts and Iraqi informants said that Lynch fought fiercely, was stabbed and shot multiple times, and that she killed several of her assailants.

"She was fighting to the death," one of the officials was quoted as saying. "She did not want to be taken alive."

It became the story of the war, boosting morale at home and among the troops. It was irresistible and cinematic, the maintenance clerk turned woman-war-

rior from the hollows of West Virginia who just wouldn't quit. Hollywood promised to make a movie and the media, too, were hungry for heroes.

Lynch's story is far more complex and different than those initial reports.

The Capture

Lynch tried to fire her weapon, but it jammed, according to military officials familiar with the Army investigation. She did not kill any Iraqis. She was neither shot nor stabbed, they said.

Lynch's unit, the 507th Maintenance Company, was ambushed outside Nasiriyah after taking several wrong turns. Army investigators believe this happened in part because superiors never passed on word that the long 3rd Infantry Division column that the convoy was following had been rerouted. At times, the 507th was 12 hours behind the main column and frequently out of radio contact.

"The doctors are reasonably sure that she does not know what happened to her."

— Kiki Bryant
Army spokesman

Lynch was riding in a Humvee when it plowed into a jackknifed U.S. truck. She suffered major injuries, including multiple fractures and compression to her spine, that knocked her unconscious, military sources said. The collision killed or gravely injured the Humvee's four other passengers.

Two U.S. officials with knowledge of the Army investigation said Lynch was mistreated by her captors. They would not elaborate.

Tipped that Lynch was inside Saddam Hussein General Hospital in Nasiriyah, the CIA, fearing a trap, sent an agent into the facility with a hidden camera to confirm she was there, intelligence sources said.

The Special Operations unit's full-scale rescue of the private, while justified given the uncertainty confronting the U.S. forces as they entered the compound, ultimately was proven unnecessary. Iraqi combatants had left the hospital almost a day earlier, leaving Lynch in the hands of doctors and nurses who said they were

eager to turn her over to Americans.

Neither the Pentagon nor the White House publicly dispelled the more romanticized initial version of her capture, helping to foster the myth surrounding Lynch and fuel accusations that the Bush administration staged-managed parts of Lynch's story.

Only Lynch is in position to know everything that happened to her — and she may not ever be able to tell the story.

"The doctors are reasonably sure," said Army spokesman Kiki Bryant, "that she does not know what happened to her."

'Miscommunication'

The 18 Humvees, trailers and tow trucks of Lynch's 507th Maintenance Company were the tail end of the 3rd Infantry Division's 8,000-vehicle convoy snaking its way from Kuwait to Baghdad. A Patriot missile maintenance crew by training, the members of the 507th based at Fort Bliss, Texas, were assigned to keep the Army's war machine moving.

The initial plan called for moving north on "Route Blue," Highway 8, until the southern outskirts of Nasiriyah, according to military officials. Because the city was still teeming with enemy fighters, commanders decided to reroute the column to "Route Jackson," Highway 1, which skirted around the town to the south and west.

But the 507th never got word of the change.

The miscommunication happened, in part, Army investigators believe, because a battalion commander in the 3rd Forward Support Battalion to which it was attached never made sure the 507th had received word of the route change.

"They didn't know about Route Jackson," said one senior military officer briefed on the investigators' findings. "We believe it would have never happened if the proper procedure had been followed." No disciplinary action is expected, said the official, who attributed the tragedy to the fog of war.

The unit fell behind as the enormous wrecking tractors and cargo trailers — equipment to haul other giant Army vehicles and supplies — tried to adjust to the division's changing pace.

But other mishaps contributed. Long before they reached Nasiriyah, two of the 507th's 5-ton trailers had broken down, forcing the back half of the unit — 18 vehicles in all — to fall fur-

See Lynch on page 6

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