

BBC documentary exposes Pentagon lies: The staged rescue of Private Jessica Lynch

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A BBC *Correspondent* documentary, “War Spin” broadcast in Britain on Sunday 18 May, presented a devastating account of how US and British government and military forces set out to mislead and misinform the public during their war against Iraq—aided by hundreds of compliant “embedded” journalists.

Presented by BBC war correspondent John Kampfner the documentary was subtitled *Saving Private Jessica: Fact or fiction?* because it focused initially on how the widely circulated account of the US navy seals rescue of Private Jessica Lynch owed more to Hollywood myth making than reality.

Lynch, a 19-year-old army supply clerk, was captured on March 23 when her 507th Maintenance Company convoy was ambushed after taking a wrong turn near the southern city of Nasiriyah. Nine other US soldiers were killed in the attack.

Having discovered that Lynch had been taken to hospital in Nasiriyah, US Army Rangers and Navy Seals staged an early morning rescue operation on April 2, storming the building and whisking the badly injured Private away to safety.

Within two hours, journalists at the media headquarters in Doha, Centcom, were summoned for an emergency press briefing, where the Pentagon released a five-minute video film of the rescue, captured on the military’s night vision camera.

According to this account, the “daring” assault had been carried out in a hospital swarming with Fedayeen, Saddam Hussein’s paramilitary martyrs brigade. Braving repeated fire, US Special Forces had retrieved the private who was said to be suffering from stab and bullet wounds and who was being maltreated.

General Vincent Brooks, the US spokesman in Doha, declared, “Some brave souls put their lives on the line to make this happen, loyal to a creed that they know that they’ll never leave a fallen comrade.”

Reports of Private Lynch’s period in captivity flowed thick and fast: we were told how she had fought valiantly, firing until she had run out of ammunition, wounding and killing several Iraqi soldiers despite her own injuries. Later reports suggested that Lynch might even have sustained some of her gun wounds whilst held captive as part of a brutal regime of interrogation.

The media then reported that Lynch’s rescue had been aided by Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief, an Iraqi lawyer, who had been moved to intervene after witnessing her being beaten by one of her captors. According to the Pentagon, al-Rehaief had risked his life to make several journeys, retrieving information on the private’s whereabouts and conveying them to the US military.

Within the US, the young private became a heroine. Although she is still receiving treatment, and doctors say she has no recollection of the

episode and probably never will, offers have apparently been made to turn her story into a blockbuster movie. Al-Rehaief and his family have been granted asylum in the US and he has signed a \$500,000 book deal.

Kampfner dismisses much of the rescue accounts as “a script made for Hollywood. Made by the Pentagon”.

As the US-led war began to run up against Iraqi resistance, and the claims that civilians would gather in their thousands to applaud the coalition forces failed to materialise, public opposition to the invasion had hardened.

The rescue of Private Lynch was therefore crucial, Kampfner reported, in attempting to win back public support and to prove American might. That is why there was barely any mention of Lynch’s fallen comrades whose bodies were recovered from makeshift graves during the same mission.

The *Correspondent* team had gone back to Nasiriyah to interview eyewitnesses on events and found an entirely different story. Doctors insisted that far from being ill treated Lynch had received the best treatment possible. Assigned to the only specialist bed in the hospital, and one of only two nurses on the floor, medical staff had even given blood to help her due to a shortage.

Dr Harith al-Houssona, who looked after Lynch throughout her ordeal, told the documentary, “I examined her, I saw she had a broken arm, a broken thigh and a dislocated ankle. Then I did another examination. There was no [sign of] shooting, no bullet inside her body, no stab wound—only RTA, road traffic accident,” he recalled. “They want to distort the picture. I don’t know why they think there is some benefit in saying she has a bullet injury.”

Doctors insisted that the Iraqi military had fled the hospital more than 24 hours before US Special Forces arrived. An eyewitness confirmed that the US military had been aware of this. Hassam Hamoud, a waiter at a nearby restaurant, said he had been approached by a US advance party and asked if there were any Fedayeen in the hospital. He told them they had already left.

Even so US Special Forces chose to enter the hospital at the dead of night, with guns blazing. Dr Anmar Uday told the programme, “We heard the noise of helicopters. We were surprised. Why do this? There was no military, there were no soldiers in the hospital.

“It was like a Hollywood film. They cried, ‘Go, go, go’, with guns and blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show—an action movie like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting, breaking down doors.” Doctors and patients had also been handcuffed to their beds.

Doctor al-Houssona also claimed that medical staff had tried to help Lynch escape two days before the snatch team arrived, placing her in

an ambulance and instructing the driver to take her to a US checkpoint. The driver had to retreat back to the hospital, however, when he came under fire from American troops.

Kampfner reported that he had asked Bryan Whitman, US deputy assistant secretary of defence, to release the full tape of the rescue rather than an edited version in an effort to resolve the disparate accounts. “He declined. Whitman would not talk about what kind of Iraqi resistance the American forces faced. Nor would he comment on the injuries Lynch actually sustained. ‘I understand there is some conflicting information out there and in due time the full story will be told, I’m sure,’ he told me.”

Kampfner suggested that the analogy with a Hollywood movie was not accidental. In 2001, Jerry Bruckheimer, producer of *Black Hawk Down*, and Bertram van Munster, who was behind the US reality show *Cops*, visited the Pentagon to suggest *Profiles from the Front Line*. The patriotic primetime television show, following US forces in Afghanistan, was to relay “human stories told through the eyes of the soldiers.” Van Munster told Kampfner, “If you’re a cheerleader of our point of view [the US] ... then these guys are really going out on a limb and risking their own lives.”

“It was perfect reality TV, made with the active cooperation of Donald Rumsfeld and aired just before the Iraqi war”, Kampfner reported. “The Pentagon liked what it saw. That approach was taken on and developed on the field of battle in Iraq.”

“George Bush and Tony Blair knew how vital it was to get the message right, to present the war and the case for war,” the documentary explained. Central to this was ensuring that the 600 journalists to be embedded with the military played their role.

These were to live, eat and sleep alongside chosen military forces, providing “live” and apparently “objective” accounts of the military action. Even if the embeds were not necessarily diehard supporters of the war against Iraq, their dependency upon the military unit for their very lives, gravely compromised their reporting.

Walter Rogers, from CNN, told the programme that some of his colleagues had taken to wearing US military uniform. “I think they crossed a line there,” he said. Despite this, Rogers could not conceal his excitement at working along the US Army’s Third Squadron Seventh Cavalry.

“That was fun.... There was a real sense of awe watching this military sweep unfold before you and you knew that there was nothing that the other side could put in your path which would stop you.”

Clive Myrie from BBC News told the documentary that he had been embedded with Unit 40 Commandos “who actually had something to do. And it meant we had some very, very productive periods with a lot of great action footage.”

Not only did such enthusiasm severely compromise the line between what could be considered objective reportage and raw military propaganda, journalists even found themselves actively helping in the practical military effort.

A clearly embarrassed Myrie recalled one occasion during a confrontation with Iraqi troops when, “There was bullets flying everywhere. We get out of the ... Land Rover and we hide in a ditch. One of the Marines said; why don’t you make yourself useful?... And he’s throwing the flares at me and I’m throwing them at the guy who’s got to light them and send them off into the sky, and I’m thinking, why, what am I doing here?”

Kampfner’s commentary revealed that some British officials had been embarrassed by the “Saving Private Lynch” affair, considering the official version so tacky that it was compromising the entire media

output. But “War Spin’s” revelations were just as damaging to the British war effort.

Craig Copetas, from Bloomberg, reports that he had been told not to “take any pictures or describe British soldiers carrying guns. I was told that there was a decision made by Downing Street that the military minders of the journalists down there were to go to any lengths to not portray British, the British fighting man and women, as fighters.

“They wanted them there to have them there as nation-builders, that they weren’t going to be killing people. The media minders would get very very upset with you very fast and threats were levelled at you that you would be disembedded.”

Such a prospect meant either having to leave Iraq, or being one of those independents attempting to gather reports by their own efforts—ten of whom were killed in action, often by so-called “friendly fire”. ITN reporter, Terry Lloyd, was one of the first to die. Daniel Demoustier, who was travelling with Lloyd, recounted how they had come under fire by US tanks.

US military spokesman, Jim Wilkinson was blunt on his attitude to the “unilaterals”. “They were a pain in our rear a lot of times,” Wilkinson told the documentary.

The “real superstars of this war were those media journalists who were embeds,” Wilkinson went on, boasting, “General Franks signs my cheque and I make news based on his terms.”

Michael Wolff, from *New York* magazine, told of his treatment by Wilkinson when he raised critical questions during one press briefing. “He said, ‘this is war, (bleep) hole’. He said, ‘don’t (bleep) around with things you don’t understand’. And then finally it was; ‘no more questions for you, why don’t you just go home?’”

Where the embeds were not enough, the military would simply write their own reports, or shoot and edit their own films, Kampfner explained, and distribute it to news channels that would lap it up.

Or they would simply lie.

Following the bomb explosion at a street market in Baghdad, during which 14 people were killed, US and British forces at first obfuscate, and then deny any involvement. Even after a second market bombing two days later, where US missile parts were recovered, US and British sources briefed that the Iraqi military were responsible. UK Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon asserted that journalists’ reports could not be trusted, unless they had been officially blessed. “What is important about this is all of us should look very sceptically at these kinds of reports, relying only on known and agreed facts,” he said.

The BBC documentary was angrily condemned by US officials. Whitman said that claims that Private Lynch’s rescue was stage-managed “is ridiculous, I don’t know how else to respond. The idea that we would put a number of forces in danger unnecessarily to recover one of our POWs is just ridiculous.”

The US military had never claimed that its forces had come under fire when they burst into the hospital. Nor had it released an account on what had happened to Lynch because, “she never told us”, he said. “Certain facts about what happened to other soldiers got confused with what may have happened to Jessica,” Whitman maintained.



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