

America's maimed come home from Iraq

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The welcome home parade given for Private Jessica Lynch on July 22 highlighted an aspect of the war on Iraq that is receiving little attention: the return to American working class communities of severely wounded and traumatized soldiers.

A great deal has been written about Jessica Lynch from the standpoint of attempting to turn her into a patriotic icon. There are elements of her story and circumstances, however, that are typical of many American soldiers. From a hamlet outside the small West Virginian town of Elizabeth, in Wirt County, she joined the military primarily due to the lack of opportunities. *Stars and Stripes* politely described the depressed housing in Elizabeth as “modest clapboard houses.” A local resident told the military newspaper: “We’re so proud of Jessica we don’t know what to do. She was so determined to be somebody, but there were no jobs here. This little town doesn’t have something for the future for kids like bigger towns. Her brother was in the service. She wanted to go too.”

Lynch sustained multiple injuries during the March 23 attack on her unit, the 507th Maintenance Company. Her left leg, right foot and right arm were broken, a disk in her back was fractured and she suffered head trauma. She can stand, but not for lengthy periods of time, and endures bouts of intense pain. A military spokesman told the media: “She’s got a long rehabilitation ahead of her. She’s got a long way to go.” Lynch delivered her short address to the ceremony in Elizabeth from a wheelchair.

Recent studies of military enlistment have found that white youth from rural towns like Elizabeth, along with minority youth from working class areas of major cities, make up the highest proportion of US troops. Combat troops are disproportionately drawn from the rural poor. Military sociologist Charles Moskos noted in *USA Today*: “If anyone should be complaining about battlefield deaths, it is poor, rural whites.” While Lynch

is back home, a dozen or so young men from Wirt County, W.Va., reportedly remain in Iraq.

The death toll of American soldiers in Iraq is the subject of daily updates by the media. As of July 28, CNN’s web site listed 247 confirmed US deaths from both combat and non-combat causes since the launch of the invasion in March. Of these 247, 164 were killed in combat. There had been 28 combat deaths so far in July—a rate of one per day—as well as 19 non-combat fatalities. The tally of American soldiers wounded, injured or falling ill in Iraq is not being recorded so meticulously, but it is steadily growing.

The last official figure was given on July 9, when the Pentagon announced that 1,044 American soldiers had been injured in Iraq since March 20. Of these, 662 US troops were reportedly injured between March 20 and May 1, the date Bush declared “major combat” to be over. The remaining third were wounded subsequently.

In the last 20 days, the news wires have reported at least another 50 US soldiers wounded in action (WIA). This figure only includes combat-inflicted injuries. The overall number of troops being evacuated from Iraq for medical reasons is far higher. According to the July 18 European edition of the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany was receiving 48 new patients per day in the second week of this month from Iraq and Afghanistan, of which only two or three had sustained their injuries in combat.

Since the closure in early July of a temporary hospital established in Spain for the invasion stage of the war, Landstuhl has been responsible for processing many of the casualties from both Iraq and Afghanistan. On July 10 alone, 140 new patients from Iraq arrived.

An unconfirmed report published on July 17 by the Saudi *Al-Watan* newspaper alleged that three US soldiers had been evacuated from Iraq suffering from the symptoms of radiation exposure. If the report

proves to be correct, it is not surprising. An initial assessment, published on June 24 and compiled by researcher Dan Fahey, estimates that between 100 and 200 metric tons of depleted uranium munitions were used by the US and Britain during the invasion of Iraq, contaminating swaths of the country. The assessment also documents a number of combat-related incidents that may have resulted in US and British troops being exposed. [See:

[http://www.antenna.nl/~wise/uranium/pdf/duiq03.pdf.](http://www.antenna.nl/~wise/uranium/pdf/duiq03.pdf)]

Landstuhl's exiting commander, Colonel David Rubenstein, told *Stars and Stripes*: "There are still soldiers with some pretty horrendous wounds, as well as a lot of disease and nonbattle injuries." Among the medical issues the hospital reported treating are injured backs, respiratory problems and pregnant female soldiers who are automatically transferred out of combat zones. He referred to the situation confronting the hospital as "the grind" as the casualties come "day in and day out."

In some cases the injuries suffered by US soldiers have been so minor they were reportedly returned to their units the same day. In other cases, the injuries have been critical. The majority of guerrilla attacks on US occupation forces have been carried out by remotely detonated bombs or rocket-propelled grenades. The wounds inflicted often include shattered limbs, third-degree burns and ruptured organs.

From Landstuhl, wounded soldiers requiring ongoing treatment are transferred to facilities in the US such as the Army's Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. Jessica Lynch was released from Walter Reed on July 22. The hospital had treated 650 soldiers from Iraq, half of whom had been wounded after the end of major combat.

This month, *Washington Post* journalists Tamara Jones and Anne Hull authored one of the few efforts in the US media to document the fate of some of the more seriously wounded American soldiers. Published in two parts on July 20 and 21, the in-depth piece reported from Walter Reed, focusing on the hospital's orthopedics section, Ward 57, where soldiers undergo rehabilitation following amputations. The ward was filled to capacity. The article noted: "High tech body armor spared lives but not necessarily limbs." [See: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16510-2003Jul19.html.](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16510-2003Jul19.html)]

The three troops who provided intensive interviews to the *Post*—one junior officer, one regular enlisted soldier and one reservist—were wounded during the "major combat" phrase of the war. They are all in their 20s and have lost part of one or both legs.

Two walked on landmines; the other was injured by mortar or artillery fire—possibly friendly fire. First Lieutenant John Fernandez had married just before the war. Garth Stewart, from Stillwater, Minn., joined the military because "you get out of high school and you join the Army, or you get out of high school and live in your parent's basement."

Danny Roberts, a reservist from Wisconsin and an aspiring teacher, told the *Post*: "I want the world to be a better place. We gotta focus on homelessness, on education. We spend more money on guns and tobacco than we do on education."

Long-term disability is the most tragic and most visible injury of war, but it is far from the only injury soldiers have sustained in Iraq. According to a feature in the July 9 *Christian Science Monitor*, the US military has taken unprecedented steps to prepare for the inevitable psychological problems among returning troops. The *Monitor* reported: "Early intervention, officials hope, will lessen the amount and severity of post traumatic stress, depression, substance abuse, as well as domestic violence and marital breakdowns."

There are already indications that the US military's one-sided massacre of thousands of outgunned Iraqi defenders has deeply disturbed some of the soldiers who took part. Susan Wilder, who works at the Fort Stewart Army Community Service, reported to the *Monitor*: "Soldiers have come up to me and said 'I'm worried what my family will think of me when they find out what happened over there.'"

Such sentiments of guilt will only be heightened, and compounded with anger, by the knowledge that the war was fought on the basis of lies.



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