

***Captain May – July 29, 2003 – unpublished essay:***

***“Private Jessica Lynch, the media and the military”***

By Captain Eric May

So at last we know the real Private Jessica Lynch: She was moving north across the desert in a lost convoy when a rocket slammed into her vehicle, causing her to crash, breaking her bones and knocking her out. She is a brave young woman who served her country, bled for it, and sustained life-long injuries as a result. Like all the other casualties, she deserves our deep respect and gratitude.

But the truth above wasn't what we were told when Army public affairs created the “Private Jessica” hoax that tantalized the nation for the weekend of April 5/6. No, that was a far different person, described in terms like these:

“Private Jessica killed four Iraqi soldiers in a desperate firefight before her rifle jammed. She then continued to fight, broken-boned and bayoneted, until captured. After being held captive, she was heroically rescued in a bold Special Forces raid.”

Now we know that the Army made all of it up, but at the time we thought it was the truth. As a former Army public affairs officer, I'm outraged that my colleagues so abused the public trust. We have no excuse for our unethical conduct, since every one of us has been trained to tell media the truth so that they could tell it to the people, not lie to the media so that they could lie to the people. We fought the American Revolution for the right to say and learn the truth, after all.

Some people have cynically argued that the media itself bears some responsibility, that they went along with the Private Jessica lie to boost their ratings over the weekend of April 5/6, but that doesn't make any sense to me for a couple of reasons: First, every journalist knows that publishing or broadcasting a lie is the profession's most serious ethical breach, and I can't name a single reason why so many journalists would do so. Second, when the media lifted and shifted their attention to Private Jessica, they lost the best story of the war: the Battle of Baghdad. You'll probably remember that it was pending, now that you think about it...

On Friday night, April 4, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division had seized control of the Baghdad airport after a three-day fight. It left its scout unit, the 3/7 Cavalry, to hold the airport while it encircled the city. There was plenty of tension in the faces of the TV embeds that night, because Saddam Hussein had promised an “unconventional” attack before dawn...

I was hoping to find out what would happen the next day, but that was when the media switched to the Private Jessica story – and they stayed with that story until the whole battle was over! It must not have been much of a battle...

The English-language web site for Al Jazeera paid events in Baghdad more attention. So many Americans were turning to it over the weekend that its site crashed, and the archives for the events of the missing weekend in April still won't come up. The Arab journalists' decision to stay close to the battle cost them dearly, though. Several of them died in bad-luck bombings by the US military after the Battle of Baghdad was over...

Thankfully, there were very few American battle deaths. According to Pentagon figures, the number of soldiers killed in subduing a city larger than Houston was only two for Saturday, April 5 and three for Sunday, April 6. Even more interesting, those numbers were greatly *down* from the daily averages of the days both before and after the Battle of Baghdad, when from five to ten soldiers were dying each day. In other words, we had the fewest deaths on the days we were doing the most fighting...

It's a crazy world where the embedded media turns from the grit of real combat to a mirage, and where more Arab journalists die *covering* the big battle than American soldiers died *fighting* it. Thomas Jefferson and George Orwell must be scratching their heads as they roll over in their graves...

When all is said and done, I believe the people of the United States will want to know who ordered the military to conduct a propaganda campaign against them. Someone in the military chain of command did it, that's for sure, and at the top of that chain sits President George W. Bush. As the man we elected for his straight-shooting, no-nonsense approach, I hope he will do his level best to find the person who so abused our trust. That person, however lofty his position on the Bush Team, deserves harsh punishment for challenging the foundation of our democracy: That We the People are not children but citizens, and that we need to know the truth to be free!

*Captain May was the Public Affairs Officer for the Houston's 75<sup>th</sup> Reserve Division, and the editorial writer for local NBC TV affiliate KPRC.*