

Former prisoner of war Jessica Lynch shares her story of resilience

The Iraq war veteran kicked off ASU's Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement speaker series

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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When Jessica Lynch stood behind the podium on Monday at the Paul C. Helmick Center on ASU's Tempe campus, she didn't look like someone who's been through war. Petite, soft-spoken, with a teacher's warmth in her smile, she greeted the crowd with a touch of humor.

"It's such an honor to be here. Last time I visited in July — never again," she said with a laugh. "October's much better."

That light moment masks the weight of her story. At just 19 years old, Lynch became one of the most recognized faces of the Iraq War as the first American prisoner of war rescued alive since World War II.

Lynch's Oct. 6 appearance wasn't just a talk — it was the kickoff to Arizona State University's [Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement](#) speaker series, launching the semester with a powerful story of survival and strength.

"Our office selected Jessica Lynch for our speaker series because her story embodies resilience, courage and the enduring commitment to service that we strive to highlight for our students and the ASU community," said [Wanda Wright](#), director of the Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement and assistant teaching professor in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts.

"As a former U.S. Army soldier and former prisoner of war, Ms. Lynch's experience of surviving captivity, overcoming several injuries and continuing to advocate for veterans and service members is profoundly inspiring," Wright said.

More events

Check out more [upcoming events](#) from the Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement.

A teacher's dream, an Army detour

Lynch grew up on a back road in Palestine, West Virginia — a town so small it boasted a Mayberry Street and a sheriff literally named Andy. By her senior year of high school, she imagined herself standing in front of a kindergarten classroom, not on a battlefield.

“From the time I was 5 years old, I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher,” she said to the assembled group of about 80 people, many of them fellow veterans.

But in the summer of 2001, when a recruiter stopped by her house to talk with her younger sister, the Army offered something the Lynch family couldn’t ignore: money for college, the chance to see the world and the honor of serving their country. Her brother signed up. Weeks later, Jessica followed.

She arrived at Fort Bliss in West Texas for basic training just one week after 9/11 — frightened and nearly blind after losing a contact lens on the way, she was issued the infamous oversized GI glasses.

“They literally looked like donuts on my face,” Lynch remembered, smiling at the memory.

At Fort Bliss, she met her roommate, [Lori Piestewa](#), a Hopi mother of two from Arizona. The two became inseparable. They called each other “roomie,” ate every meal together and shared dreams of the future.

“We hit it off instantly,” Lynch said. “Whenever you saw one of us, you saw the other.”

By 2003, Lynch had already reenlisted, angling for a Hawaii assignment. She never made it. Her orders took her to Iraq.

Prisoner of war

The mission was simple, at least on paper: Follow a convoy north to Baghdad, then split off to two designated positions. Lynch’s unit had GPS devices, radios and maps. But by the second day, nearly everything went wrong.

Her convoy got lost outside the city of Nasiriyah, and her unit was 19 hours behind the main force. Lost and cut off, they drove straight into an ambush.

“Lori was driving the Humvee. We were hit, and then an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) slammed us into the back of a truck,” said Lynch, who blacked out after the impact. When she finally came to, she was no longer a soldier in battle — she was a captive.

Lynch later learned 11 of her comrades in her unit were killed, including Piestewa, who died on March 23, 2003, at Saddam Hussein General Hospital. She was the first Native American woman to die in combat for the U.S. military.

In captivity, Lynch’s injuries were staggering: a broken back, a shattered arm, a crushed foot. She was starved, filmed for propaganda and moved from room to room in a hostile hospital.

“They told me they would amputate my leg,” she said. “I had no idea if I would survive.”

On April 1, 2003, U.S. Special Forces stormed the hospital, which shook with explosions and gunfire. Lynch thought the building was under attack until a soldier burst into her room and tore the American flag from his uniform.

“He told me, ‘We’re Americans, and we’re here to take you home,’” she recalled. “I said, ‘I’m an American soldier too.’”

Weighing just 76 pounds, Lynch was evacuated by helicopter, flown to Kuwait, then to Germany. The rescue was broadcast worldwide, her frail body carried on a stretcher and her survival a symbol of hope amid the chaos of war.

Life after Iraq

The road to recovery was long and grueling: eight surgeries, metal rods, a body that still carries the scars of Iraq. Malnourished, broken and barely 20, Lynch had to relearn how to walk, how to trust, how to live. She said therapy sessions did not work.

“What worked was being with my family and friends, and people who understood me,” she said. More than anything, her fellow POWs kept her grounded. Their group text, she added with a grin, “is hysterical. We bust each other’s bubbles constantly. That’s our therapy.”

Lynch was medically discharged in July 2003 but refused to stop where the Army left her. She returned to school, earned degrees in education and communication, and today works both as a substitute teacher and as the women veterans program director in West Virginia.

Her mission now is simple but urgent: “I just want to make sure our returning veterans — especially women — don’t become a statistic.”

Two decades removed from that dusty road in Nasiriyah, Lynch continues to tell her story not to relive the trauma, but to share its lesson.

“No matter what you’re faced with in life, just don’t give up,” she said. “You’ll get there. Keep fighting. Keep persevering.”

Then, with the same quiet conviction that carried her through captivity, she added, “I never thought it would happen to me. But here I am. And if I can get through it, so can you.”

Lynch’s visit offered a heartfelt chance to reconnect with Piestewa’s mother, Percy, and her son, Brandon, both of whom traveled from Flagstaff to attend the event.

“It’s just a good feeling to be with Jessica because the girls were so close to each other,” Percy said. “Jessica was the last person to see her alive and she can tell me stories (of) what Lori did when they were in the Army.”

Brandon Piestewa, who was just 3 years old when he lost his mother, shared that it has taken him many years to come to terms with her choices and to fully understand the emotions tied to her memory.

“Emotions have changed over the years,” said Brandon, who is now 25. “Growing up, it was always, ‘Why did she go in the service? Why did she do this?’ As I’ve grown up and matured, I have come to understand how much her service meant to others, especially the Native American population. Her service now hits a deeper part of me where it’s become very special.”

Two veterans in attendance said they were deeply moved by the honesty and heartfelt depth of Lynch’s testimony.

“What resonated with me was how Ms. Lynch endured,” said Beverly Wolf, an Air Force veteran who served from 1977 to 1982. “I’m amazed she’s able to talk about it now in such a positive way. She didn’t sound angry. She didn’t sound vindictive. She talked about her strength and what it did for her.”

Lele Knatsir, who was in the Army from 2021 to 2025, said Lynch’s talk reminds her of the honor that goes with serving in the military.

“We often see the glory but don’t see the guts or the reality of war,” said Knatsir, who is enrolled in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies. “Seeing her (Lynch) alive and well gives me a lot of hope.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Retired Army veteran Jessica Lynch shares her experiences from the Iraq War — including her capture, injuries and journey of survival and resilience — during a speaking event held Oct. 6 at the Paul C. Helmick Center on Arizona State University's Tempe campus. The event served as a kickoff for the Office for Veteran and Military Academic Engagement's speaker series. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Retired Army veteran Jessica Lynch shares a moment with Percy Piestewa after talking about her experiences in the Iraq War at an ASU event on Monday, Oct. 6. Piestewa is the mother of Lori Piestewa, who was Lynch's roommate at Fort Bliss in West Texas and was killed while the two were serving together in Iraq in 2003. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News