

Forum

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Keith L. Runyon, editor
krunyon@courier-journal.com
582-4594, phone
582-4155, fax

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The faces of women at war in Iraq

Conflict has feminine heroes, villains

Ellen Goodman



This is the latest entry in the Lynndie England photo album. A portrait of the 22-year-old private, sober, downcast and guilty as charged. Guilty of conspiracy. Guilty of mistreating detainees. Guilty of an indecent act. Guilty — although there is no official crime for this — of shaming her country.

It's been nearly two years since Pfc. England became the face of Abu Ghraib, the icon of the abuse scandal. The first snapshot in the Lynndie England album showed a small, jaunty soldier in T-shirt and fa-

tigues, with a haircut invariably described as "pixie-like," holding a leash. At the end of the leash was a naked Iraqi.

The second snapshot showed her smiling, cigarette dangling from her lips. Her right hand signaled thumbs up, her left hand pointed at the genitals of naked Iraqi men. It was taken on her 21st birthday.

These photos not only shook and shattered the image of Americans in Iraq. They were gender-bending to the

See **WOMEN**, H4, col. 1



Associated Press

U.S. Army Pfc. Lynndie R. England arriving at the courthouse in Fort Hood, Texas, on Tuesday.

WOMEN | Faces in war vary

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breaking point. A country barely used to the idea of women in war was suddenly confronted with the portrait of a woman as an equal-opportunity abuser.

We were also appalled by Charles Graner, the ringleader of the abuse, a former prison guard from Pennsylvania run amok. But it was the femaleness of the young reservist that prompted a rash of stories titled "Explaining Lynndie England."

It was woman-as-torturer "angle" behind the profiles describing her as a "hell-raiser" from a trailer-park family who first married at 19 and joined the reserves to get money for college and a career as a meteorologist.

If the first two images were breathtaking, the third was no less unsettling. By the time the legal proceedings began last September, the slight, smirking woman had been transformed by eight months of pregnancy. What female archetype did that fit? A defendant in a maternity uniform? A madonna as sexual abuser?

As for the fourth portrait, turn the page to last May. In a military courtroom Lynndie

England held her seven-month-old baby. Nearby sat Graner, convicted ringleader, father of her child, and — to add to the soap opera — newly married to another defendant in the Abu Ghraib case.

It's no wonder that her lawyers in the final trial went photo-shopping through the available female images for their last gasp defense. Tough-as-males soldier or pregnant defenseless woman? Wrong woman or wronged woman? "When all else fails, you try 'the girl defense,'" says a disdainful Lory Manning, a retired Navy captain and advocate for women in the military.

England's lawyer copped her to fit a traditional frame. She was "an overly compliant personality," prone to depression, a Graner-pleaser. She was not a power-crazed conqueror but a slave for love. At her sentencing hearing, England said, "I was used by Pvt. Graner. I didn't realize it at the time."

It is no wonder that the military jury rejected the "love" excuse. As Manning says, "It doesn't take a moral giant to know that there are things you don't do for love, and torture is one of them." England was one



Washington Post photograph

'The first snapshot in the Lynndie England album showed a small, jaunty soldier in T-shirt and fatigues . . . holding a leash.'

of three women among the Abu Ghraib Nine. Even those who believe that Lynndie England was a photogenic fall girl for prisoner abuse blame the outrages on the chain of command, not the chains of love.

But before we close the album with a shot of England going to jail, there is something more to be said. The military is, or was, the literal last male bastion. On television, a female commander in chief is still just

a fantasy. But there are 76,800 women in uniform, 11,000 in Iraq where the front lines in this impossible war are as indefinable as the route of a suicide bomber.

In the Iraq War, women have been elevated to the superheroine status like Jessica Lynch and lowered to supervillain status like Lynndie England. But 40 women have been killed and 400 wounded. Few know the name of Leigh Ann Hester, a



A hero of the war: Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester of Richmond, Ky., vehicle commander, 617th Military Police Company, receiving the Silver Star at an awards ceremony in Iraq in June. She was the first woman soldier since World War II to receive the Silver Star.

23-year-old retail store manager from Kentucky who fought her way to the first Silver Star for valor in combat awarded to a woman since World War II.

As women go to war, the military offers a sometimes glorious and sometimes dismal reminder of equality. A reminder that women have as many points on the moral compass as men. That women soldiers have won an equal chance to bring honor or shame to them-

selves and their country.

If and when war demands heroics, it produces heroines, too. But if and when war brings out our worst, the human in the word "dehumanizing" also includes women. The Lynndie England Album. It's not a pretty picture.

Ellen Goodman is a columnist with the Washington Post Writers Group. Her email address is ellengoodman@globe.com.