

**LORI
ANN
PIESTEWA
1979-2003**



**FALLEN
NATIVE
AMERICAN
FEMALE HERO**

In 2003, three days after America invaded Iraq, a convoy was attacked after taking a wrong turn. U. S. Special Forces rescued Jessica Lynch and made her a national hero, but the true hero of the day – Lori Piestewa – has been completely forgotten. On this Veteran’s Day, we should celebrate the life of the first Native American woman killed in combat and the only American servicewoman killed in the Iraqi War.

Throughout her life, Lori Ann Piestewa had a strong sense of duty to the people around her. She was born in December 1979 in Tuba City, Arizona, a border town between the Hopi and Navajo reservations. Her grandfather served in World War II; her father in Vietnam. She excelled in sports and served as commander in the Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) in high school.

Piestewa married during her senior year in high school. She raised her two children in Fort Bragg, North Carolina where her husband was stationed. When they separated, she moved back to live with her parents. She knew her parents couldn’t send her to college so she joined the military to make a better life for her and her children. In March 2001 she left for basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and continued on to Advanced Individual Training in Fort Lee, Virginia. She was assigned to the 507th Maintenance Company in Fort Bliss, Texas, where she kept track of supplies.

There she roomed with Jessica Lynch. The single mother of two and the shy teenager became best friends. In January 2003, the 507th received word to deploy to the Middle East. Piestewa would remain at Fort Bliss after severely injured her shoulder in a training exercise and having surgery but she knew Jessica was nervous about going into a war zone, so Piestewa argued her way into deployment.

On March 20, 2003, President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq. This war would be the first where women would actively participate in combat units. Piestewa would be a pioneer. Three days later, the 507th was in a convoy when leadership made a crucial navigational error, missing an exit. As they approached a Euphrates River bridge, Piestewa knew something was wrong. Through her windshield she saw the heavily fortified town of Nasiriyah. Shouldn’t they be in the desert?

At the far end of the bridge, Piestewa spotted a military checkpoint. Also in the Humvee were Lynch; another maintenance member, Shoshana Johnson; their sergeant; and two Marines. The Iraqi soldiers waved, beckoning them into the city. As they moved through the city, they could see Iraqis coming outside carrying weapons. Their commander ordered the convoy to turn around but it was too late. Piestewa kept her cool but the enemy’s firepower proved overwhelming. Their ill-fated escape was finally derailed when a rocket-propelled grenade struck the Humvee on the right side causing it to crash into an 18-wheeler.

The sergeant and two marines died instantly; the women became prisoners in the hospital; Piestewa died from her wounds shortly thereafter. Lynch and Johnson were prisoners of war. On April 1st, Lynch and Johnson were rescued by Special Forces. They also recovered Piestewa’s body from a mass grave behind the hospital. In May 2003, NBC aired a video of Lori in an Iraqi hospital, gravely wounded. Her family was furious for what they saw as a ghoulish invasion of Lori’s last moments. The media seized on the daring rescue of Lynch – because she was white – to create a tale of American heroism and valor.

But the real story of what happened in Nasiriyah that day was Lori Piestewa, who gave her life to protect her friends. Born and raised a Hopi on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, she became the first American woman to die in the war, and the first Native American woman ever to die in combat on foreign soil, in the first war that allowed women to risk their lives on the front lines.