



**Harry Alexander  
Hornbuckle**

# Why You've Heard Of Jessica Lynch, Not Zan Hornbuckle

**As Sentiment About War  
Evolves, Victims Grab  
Attention, Not Fighters**

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(See *Corrections & Amplifications* [item below](#).)

When American troops were attacked on April 7 on a road to Baghdad, a battle broke out at a dot on the map Army commanders called "Objective Curly." Eighty U.S. soldiers, expecting little resistance, were met by 300 well-armed Iraqi and Syrian fighters. Grenades and bullets flew for eight hours.

The U.S. counterattack killed an estimated 200 enemy fighters, according to the commanding officer who oversaw the battle. The American team had never trained or fought together, but all its men got out alive. The team was headed by Capt. Harry Alexander Hornbuckle, a 29-year-old staff officer who had never been in combat before. He was later awarded the Bronze Star, with a V for valor, for his efforts that day.

Capt. Hornbuckle's name has never appeared in a newspaper or on television. He has received no book deals, no movie offers, no trips to Disneyland. In September, when he went to see his parents in Tifton, Ga., his mother called the local Holiday Inn and asked the manager to put her son's name -- he goes by Zan -- on the hotel marquee. That has been his most public recognition so far.

He is one of several soldiers who rose to extraordinary heights on the battlefield in Iraq, received honors from the military and returned home to anonymity. Instead, the best-known soldier of the Iraq War is Jessica Lynch, who suffered broken bones and other injuries when her maintenance convoy was attacked. She was rescued from an Iraqi hospital a week later.

The rescue and initial reports -- later discredited -- that the 19-year-old had survived bullet and stab wounds and continued fighting helped make her a celebrity. Stores in her hometown of Palestine, W.Va., sold T-shirts with her name on them. Volunteers planted a new garden in front of her house. Alfred A. Knopf, the publishing house, signed her to a \$1 million book deal. "Saving Jessica Lynch," a TV movie about her plight, was broadcast Sunday.

Why did she become the individual celebrated in popular culture and not one of the other men and women who distinguished themselves in combat? The answer lies on the home front as much as on the battlefield.

In World War I, Cpl. Alvin York gained fame for killing 25 Germans and capturing 132. In World War II, Second Lt. Audie Murphy was credited with 240 kills and went on to star in the movie "To Hell and Back," which told the story of his bravery.

Military culture still celebrates the soldier who racks up a high body count. But since the Vietnam War, much of the country has tended to venerate survivors more than aggressors, the injured more than those who inflict injuries.

"People didn't want to view Vietnam vets as **heroes**," says Army Sgt. Scott Hansen, 56, who served as a helicopter-door gunner in Vietnam and won a Bronze Star with a V for valor for his conduct last year in Afghanistan. "I think people went there to survive -- put in their time and move on."

Many modern war memorials, most notably the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, don't include guns at all. In the 1990s, Hasbro Inc. marketed some of its G.I. Joe action figures as "Eco-Warriors" who fought the destruction of the environment. These days, when Hollywood makes a war movie, it often focuses on saving American lives -- "Saving Private Ryan," "Black Hawk Down," "Behind Enemy Lines" -- not killing others.

**Changed Image**

New technology is also changing the image of the individual soldier. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, much of the military's fighting has been done with missiles and guns fired at great distances. Then came the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, followed by wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have involved more close combat.

"There are a lot of untold stories," says Capt. Hornbuckle's commanding officer, Lt. Col. Stephen M. Twitty, who received a Silver Star for his actions that day. "We don't mind not telling them ... . We know and we're proud of what we've done."

He nominated five of his soldiers for Silver Stars and 28 for Bronze Stars with Vs for valor. Capt. Hornbuckle "took on a challenge that most people would steer away from," says Col. Twitty. "He took a chaotic situation and got it under control."

Robert H. Scales, a retired major general who just co-wrote one of the first military histories of the Iraq War, goes even further. Granted special access by the Pentagon to situation reports and dozens of senior military leaders, staff officers and combat commanders, he contends that the battle at Curly was a pivotal one, and if one soldier deserves to be singled out in the Iraq war, "I'd choose Zan Hornbuckle."

But the military today has some discomfort with the stories of individual soldiers. Asked why the Army didn't do more to publicize Capt. Hornbuckle's feats, Richard Olson, a public-affairs officer for Capt. Hornbuckle's battalion, says the thought never occurred to him. "An aspect of a soldier is that he's trained to kill," he says. "And I don't know that the public is comfortable with that."

"There's a funny shift," says John A. Lynn, who teaches military history at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "We want to fight wars but we don't want any of our people to die and we don't really want to hurt anybody else. So Pvt. Lynch, who suffers, is a **hero** even if she doesn't do much. She suffered for us."

### **Pieces in Place**

As Capt. Hornbuckle and his team prepared for battle on the evening of April 6, all the pieces were in place for their story to become as well-known as that of Pvt. Lynch. Reporters and cameramen from NBC, the Washington Post and Army magazine were told to stay with Capt. Hornbuckle's unit, under the assumption it would be in a safer location than other units.



Dennis Steele/Army Magazine/ AUSA

### **Soldiers attack the trenches**

American forces already controlled much of Iraq, including its international airport, but there were still determined Fedayeen fighters in the capital. Iraq's foreign minister continued to predict that U.S. troops would be expelled. The American commanders decided to make a bold statement.

The plan was to send tanks into the center of Baghdad, securing Saddam Hussein's palaces and other important positions. Commanders were confident they could hold the city as long as they could keep the roads clear to supply troops. The job of securing the main road from the south went to the Army's Third Battalion, 15th Infantry, commanded by Col. Twitty.

Col. Twitty says he identified three intersections on Highway 8 where Iraqi soldiers were most likely to

attack the convoys. One of his men, on a scouting mission, dubbed the intersections Larry, Moe and Curly. The nicknames stuck.

But Col. Twitty had only two companies available for the three objectives. He assigned more than 600 men to Larry and Moe, the northernmost points. To defend Curly, where he thought fighting would be lightest, he created an ad hoc team of 80, a group that had never trained or fought together. He asked Capt. Hornbuckle to lead them. The new group was dubbed "Team Zan." Predictions that Team Zan would meet light resistance did nothing to help Capt. Hornbuckle relax.

"Oh, God, now I'm in charge of this fight," he recalls thinking. "Now I'm responsible for these 80 people and responsible to Col. Twitty for accomplishing the mission."

He hadn't been looking for a fight. Like many young men, Zan Hornbuckle didn't give a lot of thought to battlefield action when he graduated from Tift County High School in Georgia and

decided on a career in the Army. Neither of his parents had served in the military. His father is an industrial mechanic at a Miller Brewing Co. plant. His mother, a former music instructor, now teaches adult education. At age 8, Zan took violin lessons. In high school, he worked for a veterinarian.

"Why on earth do you want to go into the Army?" Myric Hornbuckle recalls asking her son when he graduated from high school. "He said, 'Mama, there are people like you, good people who wouldn't hurt anyone, and there are people like Saddam' -- this is 10 years ago he said this -- who'll do anything to anyone. And there have to be people who will stand up and say 'no, you're not going to do that.' "

He enrolled at the Citadel, a military college in Charleston, S.C., splitting the cost of tuition with his parents. He graduated in 1996, married his high-school sweetheart, and joined the Army's Second Battalion, 187th Infantry. Their son Alex was born last year.

Most of his training since college has focused on battle. It became clear to him early, as he went through basic training for officers and Army Ranger school, that his work could be profoundly violent. Still, he says, he had no idea what it would be like to experience combat.

It was just past sunrise as the three companies rumbled up to objectives Larry, Moe and Curly, each about a mile apart. Looking out from the hatch of his Bradley tank, Col. Twitty spotted trenches dug beside the intersections. He picked up his radio to warn his soldiers: "They know we're coming," he said, according to an Army magazine article by embedded reporter Dennis Steele.

But when Capt. Hornbuckle first poked his head from the hatch of his Bradley and surveyed the intersection at Curly, it looked safe. "It was like driving into Atlanta," he says. "It looked like any big city."

There were two- and three-story apartment buildings, a huge factory with a peaked roof, a hotel and an office building. In the center of it all was a cloverleaf intersection, with ramps running up and down from Highway 8.

He ordered his team to encircle the cloverleaf to repel an assault from any direction. There were 22 vehicles in all -- five Bradleys, four armored Humvees, four mortar-firing vehicles and three ambulances. "Wow, that was easy," Capt. Hornbuckle recalls thinking during the first 30 seconds of silence.

Then came chaos: bullets pinging off trucks, grenades kicking up clouds of dirt and concrete, and, he says, noise louder than anything he imagined possible. The Fedayeen were firing rocket-propelled grenades from nearby buildings and driving pickup trucks with machine guns mounted at the back.

#### **At Close Range**

The biggest threat came from just beyond the circle of U.S. troops: The enemy soldiers had dug trenches under the highway overpass.

The men in the trenches seemed invisible, and they were shooting at close range, Capt. Hornbuckle says. "It was like we kicked over an anthill."

Air support was out of the question. Any attempt to bomb the enemy from the sky would kill American soldiers, too. There would be no help from the forces at Larry and Moe, because they too were under heavy attack. This battle would be fought on the ground, the old-fashioned way, with guns, grenades and mortars.

For most of the morning, Capt. Hornbuckle says he remained atop his Bradley, firing a machine gun with one hand and holding his radio with the other. He was telling the gunner on his Bradley where to aim, coordinating fire among the rest of his team, and reporting to Col. Twitty, who was about a mile to the north.

Col. Twitty says he could tell from the sound of the gunfire coming across his radio, and the tone of Capt. Hornbuckle's voice, that Curly was under heavy attack.

"Can you hold?" Col. Twitty recalls shouting.

"Sir, I think I've got it," the captain shouted back.

But Capt. Hornbuckle was worried. If the enemy coordinated its attack, they would have a chance. By mid-morning, the air was white with smoke. The intersection, he says, smelled of



Dennis Steele/ AUSA

Capt. Hornbuckle bandages the leg of Sgt. Maj. Robert Gallagher

gunpowder and engine fuel. It was 75 degrees. The U.S. soldiers, dressed in Kevlar vests and desert tan camouflage, were drenched with sweat.

"We might shoot on black today," Capt. Hornbuckle recalls one member of his team telling him, meaning that they might run out of ammunition.



Dennis Steele/Army Magazine/ AUSA

Capt. Hornbuckle in battle

Capt. Hornbuckle's outfit wasn't built for heavy combat. Yet now he had a platoon firing mortar tubes in one direction and machine guns in another. Medics were firing rifles when they weren't applying bandages and intravenous drips to wounded soldiers. Even the chaplain was taking aim at enemy positions.

"Keep doing what you're doing," Capt. Hornbuckle recalls telling the men. "You're doing good. We knew we were gonna fight today."

Bullets kicked up dust at his feet as he ran between platoons. During one dash, he says an Iraqi soldier emerged from a trench, lifted his rifle and took aim. "He drew a bead on me and I drew a bead on him and dropped him," Capt. Hornbuckle says. "He was not going to stop me from going home."

A few hours into the battle, Col. Twitty called again to find out how Team Zan was doing. Both men recall the conversation this way: "It's getting serious," Capt. Hornbuckle told the colonel, "but they're not going to kick us off here."

The colonel later made a call to Sgt. Major Robert Gallagher, a 20-year veteran who had been wounded that morning when a shell fragment lodged in his left calf. He had propped himself against a Bradley to take the weight off the leg and continued shooting while Capt. Hornbuckle bandaged his leg.

Col. Twitty says the injured sergeant major told him: "Boss, we need reinforcements and we need them now." Sgt. Major Gallagher didn't return calls seeking comment.

The colonel ordered another company to bring every combat vehicle and all the supplies it could to Objective Curly. Two U.S. soldiers in that convoy were killed -- shot by Fedayeen soldiers. But the convoy got through, "like the cavalry come to save the day," says Capt. Hornbuckle, who immediately relinquished command to its leader, Capt. Ronny Johnson.

The Fedayeen made one more push and succeeded in blowing up five of the 20 newly arrived supply vehicles. Capt. Hornbuckle says he spotted a U.S. soldier firing on a trench filled with about six enemy fighters. The soldier was alone. Capt. Hornbuckle pulled the man away as he fired his rifle into the trenches. Capt. Hornbuckle never learned the soldier's name, but he believes the man would have been killed.

It occurred to him only later, when he replayed the incident in his mind, that he had shot another enemy fighter at close range. "At least I think I shot him," he says. "He didn't pop up anymore." Capt. Chris Harris, who was at Curly, confirms Capt. Hornbuckle's account of the battle. Even though it was an ad hoc team, he says, everyone knew what to do when the situation grew tense. With no time to wait for detailed orders, soldiers relied on their training and instincts. "People knew what they were doing and didn't stop to ask, 'Is this OK?,' " he says.

Sgt. First Class Vincent Phillips, who led a small platoon of men into the trenches that day at Curly, says he saw a lot of **heroes** emerge. "We could have lost everything," he says. "There could have been all kinds of confusion about what was going on. But it just came together." He gives Capt. Hornbuckle much of the credit for coordinating the attack.

After an eight-hour fight, Curly was secured. Larry and Moe followed.

### TV Images

Back home, two videotaped images became widely associated with the war: the rescue of Pvt. Lynch and the toppling of a Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad. These pictures offered the clearest of messages: U.S. soldiers were safe; the war was over; democracy had triumphed. Objective Curly wasn't ignored. The Washington Post ran a story inside its first section two weeks after the battle. Craig White, the NBC cameraman embedded with the soldiers at Curly, beamed footage back to New York, and the story appeared on several major network broadcasts.

Vicki Hornbuckle saw some of the fight on television -- "The Battle Under the Bridge," some stations dubbed it -- but had no idea her husband had been involved. All the soldiers looked the same. Mrs. Hornbuckle says it was probably just as well that she didn't recognize her husband because she only would have worried.

The public-affairs office at Fort Stewart brags about its **heroes** from wars past. Members of the Third Division have won 49 Medals of Honor, far more than any other division, spokesmen for the division say. Audie Murphy of the 15th Infantry, which is now based at Fort Stewart, is the most decorated soldier in U.S. military history, they point out.

The Army presented awards to Capt. Hornbuckle and other soldiers from his team in an impromptu ceremony in the Iraqi town of Falluja. The military didn't issue a news release about the event. Even Capt. Hornbuckle's hometown newspaper, the Tifton Gazette, circulation 9,000, failed to note that a local soldier had been honored. "I'm embarrassed to say I've never heard of the guy," says Managing Editor Chris Beckham. The Gazette did put on the front page a story about a local soldier who suffered a leg wound. That tip came from the soldier's parents.

The biggest war **hero** in Tifton remains Harold B. "Pinky" Durham, who was awarded a Medal of Honor after he was killed in combat in Vietnam. There's a stretch of highway in town named after him.

Paul Johnson, Tifton's mayor, says he had never heard of Capt. Hornbuckle either. "I wonder what we need to do to get the good word down here?" he asked. City manager Charlie Howell pledged to look into the oversight.

### **Reluctant Hero**

Capt. Hornbuckle accepts some responsibility for his anonymity. Medal recipients are encouraged to provide personal information to the public-affairs office at Fort Stewart for press releases. He neglected to do so. When contacted for this article, he was initially reluctant to be interviewed. If he knew the battle in which he fought would receive attention, he says, he would have suggested naming the objectives after something more dramatic than the Three Stooges.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, senior White House adviser Karl Rove went to Los Angeles to encourage film executives to "show the heroism of American armed forces." But movies that followed hardly treated U.S. soldiers as conquerors. In "Black Hawk Down," the mission in Somalia that left 18 U.S. soldiers and more than 1,000 Somalis dead was portrayed as a noble failure. "Behind Enemy Lines" had a good deal in common with "The Jessica Lynch Story"; it told the story of a U.S. pilot who escaped capture after he was shot down over Bosnia in 1995.

"I think it's tougher with modern warfare" to make movies, says director John Lee Hancock, now working on a movie for Disney about the battle at the Alamo. "Older wars were easier because they were more personal. It used to be you didn't fire until you saw the whites of their eyes. Now the only light is an infrared target."

Capt. Hornbuckle returned home in late August to a quiet welcome. His parents, his wife and his 18-month-old son met him at Fort Stewart. A few weeks later, his parents hosted a small party for him in Tifton. Several old high-school friends called to welcome him back.

And that was about the end of it.

"I'm not disappointed," he says. "In your heart of hearts, you know what you did or didn't do. Was it heroic? Yes, it was. But you see so many **heroes** and you're around them every day ... it keeps you from getting an expanded image of yourself."

Now Capt. Hornbuckle is training a new company at Fort Stewart. And he is readjusting to life at home, where his wife had been taking care of all the household chores he'd once been assigned.

"I've got trash detail now," he says.

### **Corrections & Amplifications:**

The battle in which Smedley Darlington Butler earned his first Medal of Honor took place in Veracruz, Mexico. A chart accompanying a page-one article in Tuesday's editions incorrectly said the battle took place in Nicaragua.

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