



BIOGRAPHY

Melissa Rathbun-Nealy

The armed forces sent to the Persian Gulf in 1991 had a different look from American troops in earlier wars. Many of the soldiers were women. Among those women who took part in Operation Desert Storm, Melissa Rathbun-Nealy holds a special place.

As you read the passage below, think about how Melissa Rathbun-Nealy felt before, during, and after her experience.



The door of the plane finally opened. Down the stairs walked nine men and one woman, all clad in the baggy yellow uniforms worn by prisoners in Iraq. At the foot of the stairs, General Norman Schwarzkopf himself waited to greet them—the first allied prisoners of war (POWs) released by Iraq. The woman, Melissa Rathbun-Nealy, was one of just two female POWs in the Persian Gulf War, and she was the first female American soldier ever to be officially listed as missing in action (MIA).

A 20-year-old Army truck driver, Rathbun-Nealy had joined the service two and a half years before, shortly after her high school graduation. Like many soldiers, she enlisted in the Army partly for the adventure and partly to earn money for college. Once in Saudi Arabia, she expressed a desire to be near the action. On January 31, 1991, she got what she was looking for and more.

That night, she and another soldier were driving a heavy flatbed truck along the border of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The truck got stuck in some deep sand, and the two could not escape a pursuing force of Iraqis. Both soldiers suffered wounds, Rathbun-Nealy taking a bullet in the arm. The Iraqis dragged Rathbun-Nealy away and held her prisoner in Basra, a city in southern Iraq. Later they would move her farther north, to a cell in the capital, Baghdad.

Shortly after Rathbun-Nealy's capture, Iraq announced that it was holding "a number of male and female conscripts." Americans feared the worst. What would happen to a woman POW in the hands of Saddam Hussein's military? No one really knew. Family and friends worried about how she would be treated. "It can't be easy what she is going through," remarked a comrade from Rathbun-Nealy's transportation unit, "but she is a tough soldier."

Only in recent years could the words *tough soldier* be applied to a woman in the U.S. military. In the Persian Gulf War, for the first time, women were genuinely integrated into the armed forces. Although they were banned from combat roles, they supported combat forces through assignments such as truck driver, helicopter pilot, and radio operator. Deployed in combat zones, they faced many of the dangers of front-line troops—including capture and death.

The experience of being a POW was not easy, but for Rathbun-Nealy the most frightening times seemed to be during allied bombing attacks of Baghdad. "Those were the worst things, they really were," she said later. "I could see the fireballs coming down. We almost got hit twice by our own air raids." Rathbun-Nealy survived her ordeal and, in the process, added another chapter to the expanding story of women in the American military.

Questions to Think About

1. What made Melissa Rathbun-Nealy's capture unique?
2. How was the role of women in the Persian Gulf War different from that in past wars?
3. **Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment** What emotions do you think Rathbun-Nealy was feeling after her capture?