

The Doctor Known As Rocky Marciano

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Pvt. Jessica Lynch, the heroine of Iraq, was to be back in America, in a hospital in Washington, Saturday. I could have made a huge bet on her. Sure, it was rough. Broken bones and spine and a prisoner of war. But she was a lock the moment she got into an Army hospital in Germany. She had world-class hands taking care of her.

A dozen years ago, when a doctor named Fred Marciano, who is known as Rocky Marciano, was in medical school, he joined an Army Reserve unit to help pay some bills. After medical school, he became a resident and took training to be a neurosurgeon at Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix.

It takes something like 10 years. Barrow is internationally known, classic training for doctors who are going to go inside your head. One wrong probe on a patient's brain and he is either gone or he comes out talking backwards. If the work is on the spine, a mistake there and the patient goes on to live in a cart. Which is why you go to a Barrow, and they come in from all over the world.

At one point during those years, there was a patient in the house, James Breslin, who had a brain aneurysm. He was operated on by Dr. Robert Spetzler, whose name goes from Phoenix to China. Marciano was on his staff. I remember him, cheerful good-looking guy out of upstate New York. I came out of the surgery better than I ever was.

During this time, Marciano remained in the reserves. He never went on weekend drills or did any military training anywhere. He never set foot in a camp. The unit wanted him as a medical doctor. He was promoted over the years to the rank of major. He never as much as marched around a room. He didn't own a uniform.

On March 14, he got a phone call from the unit. He was activated. He was told that he was in for 90 days. He went with his unit to Fort Knox, Ky. When they got off the bus at the airport and lined up, he was wearing jeans and sneakers.

The colonel in charge asked what was the matter. "I don't have a uniform," Marciano said.

The colonel called over a sergeant. "Take him to Fort Knox and outfit him."

The colonel looked at the papers. They said Marciano was going to Hawaii.

The sergeant and Marciano took a cart and were starting to fill it with lightweight uniforms for Hawaii when the sergeant got a call. He then pushed the cart up to a counter of winter boots, then overcoats. "I'll throw in what you need," he said. His hand went out for anything heavy.

"I'm not going to need them," Marciano said. "I think so," the sergeant said. When he returned to his unit, Marciano was told he was going to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany.

Landstuhl hospital is at the base. "They told me I'm here, boots on the ground, 90 days," he was saying on the phone on Friday. "I have 78 left."

The minute he walked into the place, he was called into a meeting. They were flying in wounded from Iraq. One of them was a woman with broken bones and a spine injury. That patient was given to Marciano. After all, he had the classic training for a thing like this.

So they waited while the green bus brought the wounded from the plane. Then Fred Marciano, neurosurgeon, now a major, had his first look at his first patient of the war, Pvt. Jessica Lynch of Palestine, W.Va. She had some colossal bad luck in Iraq, did Jessica Lynch, but now it was turning. She had a surgeon's eyes and pair of hands taking care of her that come out of the best of all schooling for these talents. You could go anywhere in the world and you're not going to get much above Fred Marciano. Certainly, it wasn't easy. No back operation ever is.

This story is lovely, and it gives me great personal satisfaction-- to the point of a thrill.

Simultaneously, you wonder about a society that has women in a war, women wounded, women POWs. A 19-year-old from a trailer-camp town who wants to be a grade-school teacher has to join the Army first, go into a war because that's the only way out. Still, take a look at her in a little while and you'll surely see a walking advertisement for Dr. Rocky Marciano.