

## Italian hostage tells of rescuer shielding her from bullets

*By Peter Popham in Rome, 06 March 2005*

Italian reporter Giuliana Sgrena tells how US troops fired 400 shots into her car, killing the man who had freed her.

Giuliana Sgrena, the Italian journalist freed on Friday after a month in captivity in Iraq, was recovering in a military hospital here after taking shrapnel in her shoulder when American troops fired 300 to 400 shots into her car as it approached Baghdad airport. She touched down in Rome yesterday morning and was carried from the aeroplane wrapped in a blanket and attached to a drip, looking haggard and exhausted.



*Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena arrived at Rome's Ciampino Airport on Saturday.*

The unprovoked attack killed Nicola Calipari, the Italian military intelligence agent who had negotiated the journalist's release. He had thrown himself on top of Ms Sgrena to shield her and was killed by a bullet in the head. In a brief conversation with the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, President Bush said he was sorry about the incident and promised that it would be investigated.

The bizarre and bloody end to what should have been a day of joyful celebration occurred at around 9pm as the unmarked car with local plates carrying Ms Sgrena and her liberators approached Baghdad airport. A plane was waiting to take her home. But while the car was still some 600 metres from the terminal, American troops opened fire, unleashing a volley of 300 to 400 shots, killing Mr Calipari outright and wounding Ms Sgrena and the other two intelligence officers in the car, one of them seriously.

The American State Department claimed the car had been travelling at high speed. They said soldiers guarding the approach to the airport had waved and flashed lights ordering the car to pull over, then fired shots in the air and finally shot out the engine block to force it to stop. The statement failed to explain why the car's passengers were peppered with bullets. And in her first interview from hospital, Ms Sgrena said that the car "was not travelling particularly fast, given the circumstances".

She said that it was "while I was talking to Nicola Calipari and he was relating to me all the phases of the abduction, we were struck by a rain of fire". Calipari had immediately hurled himself on top of her, saving her life. The worst moment of the entire experience, she said, was "the man who had freed me dying in my arms". Piero Colari, Ms Sgrena's partner, told reporters angrily: "There are only two explanations, either it was an ambush or those soldiers were complete idiots."

As with earlier Italian hostage cases in Iraq, Mr Berlusconi had taken a close personal interest in the freeing of Ms Sgrena, who was abducted on 4 February by gunmen outside Baghdad University. The episode saw the anti-communist crusader collaborating intimately with the

unreconstructed leftists of *Il Manifesto*, her newspaper.

Mr Berlusconi was evidently enraged by what happened. He summoned the American ambassador, Mel Sembler, who arrived at his official residence, Palazzo Chigi, at 11pm and stayed for an hour. Mr Berlusconi said, "somebody must take responsibility for what has happened".

At the White House, a spokesman said the origin of the incident lay in "a lack of co-ordination" between the Italians and the Americans. It was said that the Americans were not informed about the progress of negotiations with the hostage-takers, and were not aware that Ms Sgrena had been freed.

Analysts said that the debacle was unlikely to force a change in Mr Berlusconi's support for the occupation. Italy has 2,700 "peacekeepers" committed to Iraq, the second largest non-American force after the British.