

## **Abu Ghraib Nurse to Speak at Stamford Nightingale Awards**

STAMFORD, CONN. -- Teresa Mercado-Sconza came back from Iraq a different person. She drove around pot holes, a strategy she'd learned to avoid bombs. She became more insistent about spending time with her family and about pursuing her master's degree because "life is short." After a year organizing health care at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, Mercado-Sconza also came back with the firm conviction that "nurses can do anything."

She'll be sharing that last message on May 3 when she keynotes the Stamford Nightingale Awards. The statewide program recognizes outstanding nurses at four concurrent banquets, one in each region of the state.

Mercado-Sconza is a nurse manager at Stamford Hospital and a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserves. She had joined the reserves to get assistance in paying for her nursing education. In two decades of service, she had never been deployed overseas except for brief training missions on friendly soil.

She arrived at Abu Ghraib prison in June of 2005, a year after stories of prisoner abuse at the facility became public. She was the officer in charge of the emergency room and was the liaison for detainee health care, making her responsible for assuring compliance with the Geneva Convention. If a prisoner alleged he'd been harmed by a guard, Mercado-Sconza reported it to the Army's Criminal Investigative Command.

While her unit provided some care to soldiers, Mercado-Sconza was mainly dealing with detainees. Many people ask her how she could care for possible enemies. "They were human beings and we gave them care," she always answers. She fought for equipment her patients needed and advocated for dying men to be reunited with their families, she said.

Mercado-Sconza and her team saw trauma and burn victims, often from bombings. They also treated all manner of chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and cancer. They were provided with interpreters, but quickly learned key phrases in Arabic. Many of the detainees spoke some English, she said, and frequently referred to the nurses as "angels."

Mercado-Sconza was hurt when she saw two television documentaries profiling medical units in Iraq that focused entirely on those providing care to US soldiers. Detainee care, she believes, is a critical mission. "We were like the ambassadors of the United States," she said.

She was aware of the weight of that role and also took on a number of tasks that were foreign to her own experience as a nurse manager, such as finances and tactical considerations. Her nurses were all responsible for being "mothers to the younger soldiers." They were also responsible for remembering to wear bullet proof vests and carry weapons when they ventured out to the mess hall.

Mercado-Sconza had to adjust to life back in the United States. Notably, she had to reinvent her relationship with her son, who turned 16 when she was away. She realizes she could be redeployed at any time. For now, she takes pride in her firm conviction that "the 344<sup>th</sup> gave excellent care."