

BLOOD BROTHERS

The war hit Charlie 1-26 harder than any unit in Iraq. They have a story to tell. This is it.



As they started loading into the Bradley fighting vehicle to roll out of Combat Outpost Apache, the soldiers laughed as if they weren't afraid. As if each, at least twice, hadn't felt the shocking heat and been deafened by the roar of roadside bombs. As if they hadn't already lost eight friends to improvised explosive devices and snipers and grenades.

These soldiers of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, laughed because it gave them courage to step back into the Bradleys. If they didn't go, somebody else would have to.

"Somewhere on that street there's an IED," Sgt. 1st Class Tim Ybay told 2nd Platoon on June 20, briefing them just before they patrolled the streets of Adhamiya, Iraq, as they had been doing for 10 months.

"I'll find it!" shouted Bradley driver Spc. Ernesto Martin.

To 15 months of combat hell forever change members of Charlie 1-26

Adhamiya and back

Stories by
KELLY KENNEDY
kellykennedy@militarytimes.com

Photos by
JAMES J. LEE
Staff

Not that day. Not that soldier. But others riding on that patrol would be among five to die the next day, when an IED flipped their 30-ton Bradley upside-down like a cheap toy and set it ablaze.

The surviving platoon members comforted each other that their friends died looking out for their brothers. They told each other they would have done the same. They cried and beat their fists

into walls. They knelt in the sand and bent their heads and tried to convince themselves Iraq was worth it.

But that was hard because they no longer believed they were fight-

ing for Iraq. They had, once, a long time ago. Before they had seen the Iraqi bodies with their heads dipped in acid, before the children tossed grenades at them. Now the locals refused even to acknowledge dead neighbors sprawled on their sidewalks.

The soldiers of Charlie Company had given up fighting for the Iraqis. They fought for each other.

And so that day, they forced aside the last moments of their friends' lives, moments filled with chaos and agony and pain and blood.

They remembered them laughing.

Over 15 months, the war would kill 14 men from Charlie 1-26, more than any other Army company sent to Iraq, according to their battalion commander.

The group of 138 would earn at least 95 combat awards. They were part of Task Force 1-26, some 500 troops, who would find 47 weapons caches, capture more