

A loss in Charlie Company

IED claims 5 on patrol from FOB Apache

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The call came in to Forward Operating Base Apache around 11 a.m. on June 21. A Bradley fighting vehicle with C Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, on patrol in the Adhamiyah neighborhood of Baghdad had rolled over and detonated an improvised explosive device powerful enough to flip the big vehicle upside-down and leave a crater large enough for a Humvee to fit inside.

More terrible news followed — the soldiers in the Bradley were trapped and the vehicle had caught fire. The gunner also was caught beneath the overturned vehicle.

Instantly, the air at the FOB seemed to become charged. The platoon members who had not gone out on the patrol remained hopeful on the outside. But an hour passed with no further word. "It shouldn't be taking this long for them to get them back," a soldier said.

The soldiers who stayed behind emitted a palpable sense of desperation for any word of their friends. Some soldiers hovered around a Humvee radio.

Spc. Gerry Denardi, who carried a guitar everywhere and always seemed to be grinning as he sweetly sang raunchy songs that he made up about his fellow soldiers, stalked past the aid station and threw a magazine at a wall. Others rushed madly to set up cots and shade.

They had to do something.

As Black Hawk helicopters hovered nearby, another explosion erupted. Word came that a second IED had hit a vehicle, shearing off a soldier's legs, though he would live.

Soon enough, the bodies of those who hadn't made it began arriving at the FOB, and the members of Charlie Company were ordered inside a nearby building while the grim business of offloading the remains took place.

Sgt. Erik Osterman had been ordered inside, but he wouldn't go. He insisted on organizing the teams that clean out the vehicles — or he does it by himself. "I can handle it," he said, and then checked himself. "Well, I can't. But I have to do this."

It seemed as if he checked in with everyone, handing out water, watching for stress signals. He sprinkled water on the roadway to try to keep the dust down.

This day showed why so many service members return home with mental health issues — and why there should be no stigma attached to seeking help for those issues. This day showed the courage and skills of 20-year-old line medics who performed tasks most civilian doctors haven't done on their worst days, as well as soldiers who jumped in vehicles to go



PHOTOS BY RICK KOZAK/STAFF

help their buddies even as they were attacked.

And it still wasn't over. Yet another explosion sounded — an RPG had instantly killed an MP from the 630th MP Company, some of whose troops happened to be in the area and had responded to the attacks on the two Bradleys. A second MP was injured and brought back to the FOB.

Charlie Company's soldiers ran back outside when they heard more injured were coming in. Several lined up against a wall, heads in hands. Others stood to the side for a solitary cigarette.

Finally, all the soldiers were back inside the FOB. The final toll: Charlie Company had lost five soldiers, the MPs one. Several were injured.

Back inside the main building stood Sgt. 1st Class Tim Ybay, a platoon sergeant who quietly takes care of his soldiers with jokes and an ever-ready willingness to listen.

After the carnage of this day, his soldiers surrounded him to offer the same.

He had been in the second Bradley to be hit — and he had lost his boys. He turned to a Military Times reporter.

"Please say good things about these guys," he said, struggling to remain composed. "They're better than anyone." □



Soldiers with C Company carry injured soldiers to the medical center at FOB Apache.

At left, Sgt. 1st Class Tim Ybay of Long Beach, Calif., and C Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, kneels and reflects after returning to FOB Apache.



A Humvee from the 630th MP Company was destroyed by an IED while responding to an attack on a Bradley fighting vehicle that killed five U.S. soldiers and an Iraqi interpreter in eastern Baghdad on June 21 in the Adhamiyah neighborhood of Baghdad. A sixth soldier from the 630th MP Company was killed while responding to the attack.