

BLOOD BROTHERS

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

'I've seen enough.

I've done enough.'

For many in Charlie 1-26, the worst was still to come

Every time they learned to evade the insurgents' methods of attack, the insurgents changed their methods. For the first five months, the Iraqis hit Charlie Company with snipers and firefights.

"I can't even tell you how many bullet rounds I heard popping off

my gunner's turret," Staff Sgt. Robin Johnson said. But after the unit lost Staff Sgt. Garth Sizemore to a sniper's bullet Oct. 17, 2006, as he patrolled on foot, the soldiers learned to stand behind vehicles, not to stand in hallways or doorways, to watch the rooftops.

Part 2

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For several months after they arrived in Baghdad in August 2006, Charlie Company stayed at Combat Outpost Apache in the insurgent stronghold of Adhamiya only while they conducted day patrols. When they rotated to the night shift, they stayed at Forward Operating Base Loyalty and drove the 45 minutes into Adhamiya. At Loyalty, they could go to the gym, the store and the air-conditioned dining facility with its five flavors of Baskin Robbins ice cream and all-you-can-eat buffets. Apache, with only one building for the American soldiers, offered little but the safety of a shorter drive.

But when Sgt. Willsun Mock died five days later after his Humvee



Sgt. Derrick Jorcke, left, and Spc. Oscar Dealba on the day five buddies were killed on patrol in the Adhamiya area of Baghdad.

triggered a roadside bomb during the trip to Adhamiya, the company commander moved his men to COP Apache permanently.

Then the insurgents started with grenades. Spc. Ross McGinnis was killed Dec. 4 when a grenade was tossed into the turret of his vehicle; he threw himself on it to save four friends.

"So we covered the turrets," Johnson said. They put up guards that deflected the grenades but still allowed the gunner to operate.

Then the insurgents began planting bigger improvised explosive devices — and more of them. One platoon ran over four IEDs within 24 hours. On Jan. 22, Pfc. Ryan Hill died when an IED exploded near his Humvee.

So the soldiers began relying

more on their heavily armored Bradley Fighting Vehicles.

"That was our fortress," said Johnson, an even-keeled noncommissioned officer the younger soldiers trusted for advice. "We were fearless in that Bradley."

If the guys were in a Bradley when an IED erupted, they walked away. So rather than patrol only in Humvees, they went outside the wire with Bradleys at the front and tail, Humvees in the middle.

Death and corruption

Now it was January, and as the chill wind of Adhamiya's desert nights slipped through the unheated building where they slept, the soldiers of Charlie Company knew they still faced at least six more



months in Iraq. Over that span they would watch two commanders leave, see nine more soldiers die, give up faith in their best defenses against the insurgents, refuse a combat mission and have three more misery-filled months slapped onto their deployment.

When the soldiers of 1-26 finally got to go home in October, the war had hit them harder than any other battalion since Vietnam.

In January, though, they knew only that they had to summon the courage to go out again. And again. The deaths, as well as broken bones, burned bodies and smashed limbs, scared them, and the young soldiers found that while the number of attacks against civilian Iraqis declined, the number of attacks against them increased.

The soldiers of Charlie 1-26 were convinced the Iraqi Army troops they worked with, Shiite forces already despised by the majority of Sunni residents of the area, were untrustworthy and knew more about the attacks than they let on.

"The corruption in the Shiite military was horrendous," said Capt. Mike Baka, commander of Charlie Company.

But within Charlie 1-26, the men learned to count on each other like family and to grieve for each other like brothers.

'Adhamiya Blues'

Of the 140 men, 95 hadn't yet achieved the rank of sergeant, and most were younger than 25. Even after 14 hours of patrolling, laughter rang through their crude