



quarters at the Apache building — especially in the dining room.

First Sgt. Kenneth Hendrix made sure Girl Scout cookies graced every table, and spent his own paycheck on video games and movies for the troops, with the teasing reminder that first sergeants make much more than privates.

Chaplain (Capt.) Ed Choi organized tournaments — spades and dominoes — and conducted religious services there every Tuesday. Sgt. William Redding, the cook, made Black Forest cakes to remind them of their home post in Schweinfurt, Germany, where they were part of the 1st Infantry Division — the Big Red One. Without contractors to serve up lobster and steaks as they did in the dining facilities

at FOB Loyalty, Redding offered a continuous supply of Pop-Tarts and peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches to the guys going out on patrol three and four times a day. Another soldier clipped hair once a week in the hallway, creating a community barber-shop atmosphere.

Spc. Gerry DeNardi, 20, served as the company cruise director. Artistic and moody, he worried before his deployment that he might be the guy whose courage left him in the midst of battle. Because of his own fears, he wanted to make everyone else forget Adhamiya, too. So every evening, he'd break out his guitar and sing the silly songs he made up about his teammates. At 2 a.m., in the dusty dank basement where the soldiers slept at Apache, DeNardi

led them in karaoke.

"There's nothing better than listening to a bunch of soldiers singing Britney Spears at the top of their girly lungs," he said. Really, it was more of a warble, but it carried through the building.

DeNardi joined the Army for the same reason so many other young men enlist. "My plans consisted of lying in a hammock," he said. "I needed time to figure out what I wanted. And I don't think you can say you're an American or you're a patriot without serving."

But the bodies and violence shook him. He and Sgt. Ryan Wood talked about the politics behind this war — and complained that Americans knew more about Britney Spears than Iraq. Wood, wiry in a way more Billy Idol than

Soldiers from Charlie 1-26 rush battalion Chaplain (Capt.) Ed Choi to medics to treat wounds suffered when a roadside bomb destroyed the Humvee he was riding in. Identified soldiers include, from right, Spc. Armando Cardenas, Pfc. Stephen Mendes and, in the rear, Sgt. Billy Fielder.

Rambo, had already decided he wanted out of the Army.

"I've seen enough. I've done enough," he said.

During a 2004 deployment with Charlie Company in Samarra, Wood watched as his platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Jorge Diaz, shot and killed a zip-tied Iraqi civilian. Wood turned Diaz in; the platoon sergeant was sen-

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VIDEO

■ Spc. Gerry DeNardi talks about the bonds between the soldiers of Charlie 1-26; nothing else much mattered.

■ Staff Sgt. Ely Chagoya plays guitar after redeployment to Schweinfurt, Germany, and talks about why he could not bring himself to play his music in the war zone.

PHOTO GALLERIES

An intimate look at the combat vets of Charlie 1-26.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Staff writer Kelly Kennedy and photographers James J. Lee and Rick Kozak first met the soldiers at the heart of this story when they were in Adhamiya, Iraq, in the spring and summer of 2007.

They interviewed dozens of soldiers, family members and others in Iraq, Germany, Colorado and Washington, D.C., for this series.

This week

Five members of Charlie 1-26 die inside a burning vehicle. The mounting casualty count wears down the fighting spirit of many in the unit.

Next week

Charlie 1-26 members are emotionally frazzled; some seek tranquilizers from the mental-health clinic. Some refuse orders to patrol a particularly dangerous area.

Dec. 24

After 15 months in the war zone, Charlie 1-26 is back home in Germany. But leaving it all behind is not as easy as the nonstop flight from Baghdad.

Read Part 1

The soldiers of Charlie 1-26 constantly patrolled the Sunni stronghold of Baghdad's Adhamiya neighborhood and paid a heavy price. One soldier would be nominated posthumously for the nation's highest valor award.