

BLOOD BROTHERS

Brothers

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tion. And then they were told it was a suicide. Reynolds confirmed that McKinney took his own life.

A week later, without their beloved first sergeant, Alpha Company would experience its first catastrophic loss on a mission that, but for a change in weather, was supposed to go to Charlie Company.

On July 17, Charlie's 2nd Platoon was refitting at Taji when they got a call to go back to Adhamiya. They were to patrol Route Southern Comfort, which had been black — off-limits — for months. Charlie Company knew a 500-pound bomb lay on that route, and they'd been ordered not to travel it. "Will there be route clearance?" 2nd Platoon asked. "Yes," they were told. "Then we'll go."

But the mission was canceled. The medevac crews couldn't fly because of a dust storm, and the Iraqi Army wasn't ready for the mission. Second Platoon went to bed.



JAMES J. LEE/STAFF

"Just the fact that there was another Bradley incident mentally screwed up 2nd Platoon," said Capt. Cecil Strickland, Charlie's company commander.

They woke to the news that Alpha Company had gone on the mission instead and one of their



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Bradleys rolled over the 500-pound IED. The Bradley flipped. The explosion and flames killed everybody inside. Alpha Company lost four soldiers: Spc. Zachary Clouser, Spc. Richard Gilmore, Spc. Daniel Gomez and Sgt. 1st Class Luis Gutierrez-Rosales.

"There was no chance," said Johnson, whose scouts remained at Apache and served as the quick-reaction force that day. "It was eerily the same as June 21.

You roll up on that, and it looked the same."

The guys from Charlie Company couldn't help but think about the similarities — and that it could have been them.

"Just the fact that there was another Bradley incident mentally screwed up 2nd Platoon," Strickland said. "It was almost like it had happened to them."

The battalion gave 2nd Platoon the day to recover. Then they were scheduled to go back out on patrol in Adhamiya on July 18.

But when Strickland returned from a mission, he learned 2nd Platoon had failed to roll.

"A scheduled patrol is a direct order from me," Strickland said.

"They're not coming," Strickland said he was told. "So I called the platoon sergeant and talked to him. 'Remind your guys: These are some of the things that could happen if they refuse to go out.' I was irritated they were thumbing their noses. I was determined to get them down there."

But, he said, he didn't know the whole platoon, except for Ybay, had taken sleeping med-

ications prescribed by mental health that day, according to Ybay.

Strickland didn't know mental health leaders had talked to 2nd Platoon about "doing the right thing."

He didn't know 2nd Platoon had gathered for a meeting and determined they could no longer function professionally in Adhamiya — that several platoon members were afraid their anger could set loose a massacre.

"We said, 'No.' If you make us go there, we're going to light up everything," DeNardi said. "There's a thousand platoons. Not us. We're not going."

They decided as a platoon that they were done, DeNardi and Cardenas said, as did several other members of 2nd Platoon. At mental health, guys had told the therapist, "I'm going to murder someone." And the therapist said, "There comes a time when you have to stand up," 2nd Platoon members remembered. For the sake of not going to jail, the platoon decided they had to be "unplugged."

Ybay had gone to battalion to



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