

BLOOD BROTHERS

Brothers

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“You never really get over the anger,” said Staff Sgt. Robin Johnson, a member of Charlie’s scout platoon who had been especially close to Agami. “It just kind of becomes everything you are. You become pissed off at everything. We wanted to destroy everything in our paths, but they wanted us to keep building sewer systems and handing out teddy bears.”

Some of the younger members of the platoon were particularly disillusioned.

Spc. Armando Cardenas, 21, had taken honors classes in high school but feared college would bore him. He wanted something challenging and found it in the Army, in Iraq. As a soldier, he was the guy who leaped out of a truck to chase an insurgent, or instantly returned fire with an uncanny ability to tell where the rounds came from. When a friend, Pfc. Ryan Hill, was killed in battle, Cardenas helped carry him back.

But Cardenas’ anger was just as quick as his heroics.

He said the platoon had been waiting for June 21 — that they had known they would eventually hit a big IED and have a catastrophic loss.

Cardenas wanted revenge. “But they don’t let us take care of the people responsible,” he said. “It was a slap in the face.”

Adhamiya remained under the control of 1-26, but the brass moved Charlie 1-26 to another combat outpost, Old Mod — so called because it used to house Iraq’s Ministry of Defense — in a calmer area on the outskirts of Adhamiya. From there, they patrolled Kadhamiya.

“If my guys had stayed at Adhamiya, they would have taken the gloves off,” said Capt. Cecil Strickland, Charlie’s company commander. “We were afraid somebody was going to get in trouble.”

There had been close calls before. DeNardi had to fight back a strong desire to kill an Iraqi — accused of triggering an IED that killed two Charlie Company soldiers — as he held a 9mm Glock handgun to the man’s eye socket.

And Cardenas and Staff Sgt. John Gregory had been ordered to the Green Zone to talk to an investigator after they roughed up two insurgents. A week after Pfc. Ross McGinnis fatally threw himself on a grenade to save four friends, Cardenas and Gregory had chased a couple of guys on a scooter and



JAMES J. LEE/STAFF

Staff Sgt. Robin Johnson works off some stress back at Schweinfurt, Germany. He said 2nd Platoon of Charlie 1-26 should not have been ordered to conduct the mission that members revolted against. Spc. Armando Cardenas, below, scans for insurgents while on a patrol in Adhamiya with other members of Charlie 1-26.

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managed to stop them. Cardenas kicked over a wooden box the two Iraqis stood next to.

“There was a grenade full of nails,” Cardenas said. “We had to go see a major about detainee abuse. We told him [the Iraqis] didn’t want to get in the Bradley.”

Nothing came of the investigation.

Such incidents belied the squared-away record Charlie 1-26 posted during its deployment to Iraq. In 15 months, they had one incident when two soldiers were caught with alcohol, Strickland said, but that was all.



COURTESY OF SPC. ARMANDO CARDENAS

“I think the performance comes from the level of discipline,” Strickland said. “And the discipline comes from the hardship. They’re a little bit more mature than a lot of other units.”

In Shiite Kadhamiya, Charlie Company found paved, clean streets. In Sunni Adhamiya, so many garbage collectors had been killed that the Shiite gov-

ernment workers refused to go there. “It was one road and one river away from Adhamiya,” DeNardi said. “But there was civilization on one side and chaos on the other.”

Suicide and a twist of fate

Lt. Col. John Reynolds replaced Lt. Col. Eric Schacht as battalion commander July 8.

Schacht left after his son died of a heart condition in Germany, the same day Charlie Company lost five men in the Bradley. Even with the high operations tempo and the loss of so many men, Reynolds called the change-over “easy.”

“It was the best transition you could get,” he said.

But within days, he would lose