

A lone Bradley Fighting Vehicle, left, sits at one end of a deserted street in Baghdad's volatile Adhamiya neighborhood. Deserted streets often are an ominous sign that residents have been forewarned of an imminent attack on U.S. troops. Right, Sgt. Derrick Jorcke, foreground, and Pfc. Mike Cieslak react to sniper fire.

they rode in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle that rolled over a powerful roadside bomb.

As DeNardi walked up the three wood steps to the outdoor stand to pick up his burger, the siren wailed.

Wah! Wah! Wah! "Incoming! Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!"

The alarms went off all the time — often after the mortar round or rocket had struck nothing but sand, miles from anything important. Many soldiers and others at Taji had taken to ignoring the warnings. DeNardi glanced around at the picnic tables to make sure everyone was still eating. They were. The foreign nationals who worked the fast-food stands hadn't left; so he went back to get the burger he had paid for.

The mortar round hit before he could pick up his order.

"I turned around and all of Burger King and me went flying," DeNardi said.

He'd lived through daily explosions in 11 months with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, at nearby Combat Outpost Apache, a no-frills fortress smack in the middle of Adhamiya's hostile streets. He had rushed through flames to try to save friends and carried others to the aide station only to watch them die.

"I'm not getting killed at Burger King," he thought, and he dived for a concrete bunker. People were screaming. DeNardi saw a worker from Cinnabon hobbling around, so he climbed out of the bunker, pulled shrapnel out of the man's leg and bandaged him. The Pizza Hut manager was crying and said two more foreign workers were injured behind her stand — near the Burger King.

"Lightning doesn't strike twice," DeNardi said, "so I went back. But there were body parts everywhere." The first man's leg had been blown off, his other leg was barely attached and he had a chest wound. "He was going to die," DeNardi said.

The other wounded man had



SGT. MIKE PRYOR/ARMY

shrapnel to his neck. DeNardi peeled off his own shirt and fashioned a bandage out of it as other soldiers started streaming in to help.

Then, "all clear" sounded over the loudspeakers as medics arrived and took over.

"I'm covered in blood, but I still have my hamburger receipt," DeNardi said. "I went back to Burger King the next day, but they wouldn't give me my burger."

For all his dark humor, the "Hero of Burger King," as fellow soldiers teasingly called him, was deeply rattled by the carnage of the explosion at the fast-food court. At Apache, he expected trouble. But not at Burger King.

"That affected me," he said. For the next few days, he said, he slept in the open-ended concrete bunkers positioned between the housing units.

It was just another bad day to add to many — and DeNardi's platoon had already faced misery that seemed unbearable. When five soldiers with 2nd Platoon were trapped June 21 after a deep-buried roadside bomb flipped their Bradley upside-down, several men rushed to save the gunner, Spc. Daniel Agami, pinned beneath the 30-ton vehicle. But they could only watch —

and listen to him scream — as he burned alive. The Bradley was far too heavy to lift, and the flames were too high to even get close. The four others died inside the vehicle. Second Platoon already had lost four of its 45 men since deploying to Adhamiya 11 months before. June 21 shattered them.

Though their commanders moved them from the combat outpost to safer quarters, members of 2nd Platoon would stage a revolt they viewed as a life-or-death act of defiance. With all they had done and all they had seen, they now were consumed with an anger that ate at the memory of the good men they were when they arrived in Iraq.

Primed for revenge

After June 21, most of Charlie Company moved out of COP Apache, their makeshift home on the grounds of one of Saddam Hussein's son's palaces. At Taji, the company would try to recover for a new mission.

Sgt. 1st Class Tim Ybay, 38, served as 2nd Platoon's platoon sergeant, but also its father figure. The former drill sergeant teased constantly and tried to treat his men like family. At memorial services for lost sol-

diers, he cried the loudest. He'd been on patrol June 21 when the five 2nd Platoon soldiers died in the Bradley. When he came back, his grieving platoon circled him as the weight of the loss forced him to his knees in the sand. He'd promised to bring all his boys home.

Now he would concentrate on the ones that remained.

"I knew after losing those five guys, my platoon had to get out of there," he said. "These were the guys they slept with, joked with, worked out with. I don't think they'd be able to accomplish the mission."

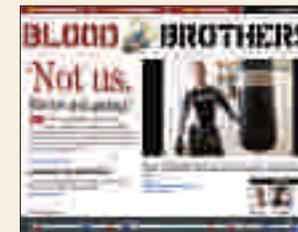
The tears came again as he spoke, and he looked away.

"And I was having a hard time losing my guys."

At Taji, the company had a week off. DeNardi looked more surfer than soldier after a couple of days at the pool. Ybay and his sergeants sat at the picnic tables drinking frozen coffee concoctions. The guys bought Persian carpets and brass lamps to send home as souvenirs — as if Taji were a vacation spot. But the anger over Adhamiya emerged even poolside, and erupted at the mental health clinic, which they visited in groups.

See **BROTHERS** next page

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VIDEO

■ Spc. Armando Cardenas says "not a single guy that died in our company was worth" the mission in Adhamiya.

■ Staff Sgt. Robin Johnson says 2nd Platoon never should have been given the mission they refused to run.

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

Soldiers in 2nd Platoon, Charlie 1-26, consumed by grief and an urge for revenge, stage a mutiny against orders to run a dangerous mission.

Next week

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

Read Part 1

The soldiers of Charlie 1-26 constantly patrolled the volatile Baghdad neighborhood of Adhamiya and paid a heavy price. One soldier would be nominated posthumously for the Medal of Honor.

Read Part 2

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.