



# Patching bodies, minds

## Line medics heal with quiet words and superhuman deeds

Stories by Kelly Kennedy  
kellykennedy@militarytimes.com

**ADHAMIAH, Iraq** — As soon as the Bradleys shoot out of the gate at Forward Operating Base Apache, Pfc. Timothy Ray starts planning.

“Whenever we leave out of that gate, the only thing that goes through my head is procedures for different possibilities,” he said, helmet outlined in a halo of dust in the back of a Bradley. “I’m always playing war games.”

If he runs out of bandages, what else can he use? If there’s no shade for the wounded, how can he improvise shelter? If one of his buddies is injured, how can he deny his emotions until his work is done?

“I know what to do,” he said. “I

can do it without sleep — which I’ve done a lot. The hardest thing is losing somebody.”

By that day, June 22, Ray had lost four friends from his platoon, and talking about their deaths washed the sparkle from his blue eyes. But “Outlaw Stitches,” as his platoon calls him, soon flashed his sideways smile again as a buddy tossed a barb into the medic’s soft underbelly.

Riding in the 111-degree bowels of the tank — two soldiers and an Iraqi interpreter passing just one cigarette at a time for the sake of air quality — Ray laughed when a teammate said, “Doc, you’re harder than woodpecker lips.”

He has to be. And that day — the worst day — would prove it.

On his first Iraq tour, Ray, 27, stands as the rock of 2nd Platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry: He’s the medic.

Long before wounded troops hit the sanitized confines of the big emergency room in Baghdad, line medics working in the field must stop the blood, restart the hearts and fill the lungs of guys they sleep, eat and work with.

Between patrols, power naps and meals, medics learn what their teammates love about their girlfriends, what their next tattoo will be and what they want to be when — if — they get out of the Army. They see their friends at their most alive moments: the moments when they dream about the future. They also see them after damage from the worst of this war’s weapons: rocket-propelled grenades, explosively formed penetrators and improvised explosive devices.

But their work goes beyond bro-

ken bodies. Line medics also often serve as the first line of care for mental health. Some of them quietly let it be known they can listen, while others actively ask, “Are you OK?”

They’ll rattle off the signs: the tapping foot, the quiet soldier who talks too much or the guy who moves slower than usual. And then they home in, taking on the problems of others even as they themselves face what could be the most traumatizing work in the military.

“They’re saving people,” said Lt. Col. Jason Wieman, division surgeon for Multi-National Division-Baghdad. “It gives you the chills sometimes. But it makes you wonder how they’re going to be five years from now after doing these things. I mean, they can’t save everybody.”

But then in a rush toward the positive that defines service members in the medical field, Wieman

excitedly went through a list of ways the medics are saving lives that weren’t possible even three years ago.

“I’ve got soldiers on the line doing needle decompressions,” he said, referring to a technique that prevents pressure from building up after a lung injury. “Seventy percent of my doctor colleagues have never done that. We’ve got combat lifesavers saving people who would have died if they’d been hurt stateside.”

It’s the ones who don’t make it that the leaders worry about. Lt. Col. David Oclander, executive officer of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, said Charlie Company has taken the most losses in its battalion, and he worries about them.

Recently, an IED hit a Humvee and turned it into a fireball, he said. One soldier burned alive. Four others had third-degree burns over 70 percent of their bod-