

Medics

From previous page

“All I really had to do was worry about the patients. The guys automatically cover you.”

A soldier who is now recovering in the U.S. was wounded the same night Hill died. An explosion left a wound in his left side about six inches long and three inches wide. Ray worked to stabilize him before completing the job at the aid station.

“We had to treat a chest wound,” he said. “There’s only so much local anesthesia can do.”

He didn’t want his platoon to see the soldier’s pain, but “you can only shield them so much,” he said.

Within hours of a morning patrol in which he treated nothing more serious than a child scared by an early wake-up from big American soldiers, Ray’s words seemed prophetic.

At about 10 a.m., two Bradleys went out on a second patrol, with Ray in the trail vehicle. The first Bradley rolled over an IED so big that it flipped the vehicle upside-down and blew a crater big enough for a Humvee to fit in.

The Bradley caught fire with three soldiers and an Iraqi inter-

preter trapped inside, and the gunner trapped underneath.

Ray immediately broke the first rule for medics. Before his teammates had a chance to clear the area, he jumped out and tried to run to the first Bradley.

His tunnel vision had kicked in. “There was small-arms fire,” he said, mud from the scene seeping through his boots. “I couldn’t get to them. The flames were too high and too hot.”

But eventually he did get close enough to try to help the gunner escape — a friend with whom Ray had spent the past year. Ray eventually got him out, but the soldier didn’t make it.

As Ray worked, Smith calmly assessed what his medics would need at the aid station. Soldiers ran back and forth from a radio to bring him updates. He knew almost immediately that the men trapped inside the Bradley were already gone, but also that the reports of small-arms fire meant more casualties. Humvees filled with Charlie Company soldiers raced out of the gate to help.

After an hour, the men were still trapped. A second explosion rocked through the compound, and the medics prepared for the worst. As Ray continued to dig around the Bradley and pry open the doors,

reports came in of more casualties.

The soldiers brought in an Iraqi girl with burns covering 60 percent of her body, as well as two Iraqi adults. The aid station medics prepared them for an airlift to the closest hospital.

And then another explosion. An RPG had hit a Humvee filled with military police who had arrived to help, killing one MP instantly. Soldiers brought in an injured female soldier and a male soldier who had lost both legs. The aid station medics stabilized them for the run to the hospital. Four MPs were treated for smoke inhalation.

The medics began passing out body bags. Charlie Company was ordered inside the building, but Ray, Lawson and Smith stayed. Smith’s team would identify the bodies even as they comforted a chaplain bruised by shrapnel and faced a platoon that, counting the four soldiers and the interpreter who had died that day, had lost a total of nine people.

Ray rode in with the remains of his friends. Guys he ate with. Guys he joked with. Guys he dreamed with.

He walked past the aid station, the trauma of the day etched in lines around his eyes and mouth.

“This is the hardest part,” he said. □



Spc. Matthew Roth of San Diego, a medic with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, smokes a cigarette while he and other medics wait for casualties at Forward Operating Base Apache in eastern Baghdad on June 21 after an explosion destroyed a Bradley fighting vehicle, killing four U.S. soldiers and an Iraqi interpreter.

Battlefield

From previous page

He didn’t realize he’d get a chance at both.

De Sersa has a business degree, but got bored managing small shops and enlisted.

And Staff Sgt. Ronnie Reynolds, 28, became a medic because his brother had already signed on as a cook — and he hated it.

When it was time to leave Apache, they packed up as a group. They’d seen too much together to leave anyone behind.

“It makes you real tight,” De Sersa said. “You protect each other. We’re all best friends.”

De Sersa spent his tour training the other medics on everything from needle decompression and chest tubes to cracking ribs, massaging hearts and pushing medications for everything from allergies to sleeping disorders.

“That ain’t taught in [Advanced Individual Training],” he said. “I’m proud of what these guys are doing — these sergeants are working way above their level.”

Sometimes that pride helps overcome the reality of what they faced. “We don’t dwell on what’s happening,” De Sersa said. “We don’t think about the person who was or what he’s going to be. You got to take that emotion and put it to the side and keep doing what you’re doing.”

Their most challenging day was



Sgt. Terence Kupau of Honolulu, a Charlie Company medic, reflects after serving at FOB Apache in Baghdad — “a pretty bad area,” he said.

when eight seriously wounded soldiers streamed in, one of whom the medics knew personally.

“That was hard for us,” Kupau



Staff Sgt. Branden De Sersa, of Sierra Vista, Ariz., a medic with Charlie Company, said FOB Taji is quieter than Apache: “Now we’re back to being regular old medics.”

said. “It was one of our buddies. But when it starts? It’s game on.”

“I’d never seen a trauma before coming out here,” Flowers said. “But after months of seeing them, you don’t even think about it.”

Worse, they said, was watching the reactions of the line medics who went on patrol with the platoons.

“We’re expecting trauma; they’re riding around hoping nothing happens,” Flowers said. “Looking at the medic’s face when he sees his [injured] soldier — that’s the hardest part for me. I

have to walk away.”

At Taji, the four take temperatures, look at rashes and check ankles for sprains at a troop clinic. They’re not allowed to do anything above their job descriptions, and get frustrated with the bureaucracy that makes a simple task time-consuming.

“In our world, if the s--- don’t get done, the soldier’s going to die,” De Sersa said. “I hate that now we have to earn our way to the trauma room.”

They still enjoy the comparative security of Taji; it’s more garrison-

like, which allows them to move closer toward home.

“No explosions,” Flowers said. They hope to return to their post in Germany in October. But they say that regardless of how the war in Iraq turns out, they’ll always be proud that they were here, fighting for each other.

“Do I like deploying to Iraq? Of course not,” Flowers said. “But I love what I get to do in Iraq. No matter what happens in this war, I know everything I did was to help anybody and everybody I could.” □