

# BLOOD BROTHERS

## Brothers

From Page 16

were both in Iraq, they rarely saw each other.

"It's impossible," he said. "You can send e-mails. But not everywhere in Iraq has nonsecure Internet and not everybody has cell phones. For the first six months, she was in Ramadi, and I couldn't get through to her." For five months, they didn't speak on the phone, he said.

No one was at their off-post home to take care of bills or make sure the pipes hadn't burst. No one was home to send care packages. When Tonya Osterman found out she was pregnant after R&R in the spring, the Army sent her home. But when she lost the baby, they sent her back to Baghdad in July.

"After she miscarried, the sergeant major put me on a bird to see her," Osterman said. But then the communications problems started again. The Iraqi cell phones inevitably cut out after 30 minutes. They were both stressed out, and the phone calls often ended in



tears. Both were diagnosed with PTSD after Samarra.

As he waited for her to come home around Thanksgiving, he did the same thing he did in Iraq to calm himself: He tried to take care of everybody else. He helped with a soldier's promotion. He listened to his guys talk about what they'd seen in Iraq.

"When I see another guy from the company, I appreciate everything a little more," he said. "Just know that each soldier fought for something. They fought for what

they believe in."

They fought for each other.

In the barracks, German workers moved heavy boxes to the windows with hydraulic lifts. The guys had moved out before leaving for Iraq, so they returned to empty barracks. Spc. Gerry DeNardi pulled out clothes he hadn't seen in more than a year — including his favorite moccasins. He unloaded the futon couch, mounted speakers on the walls and set up his new projection TV. As he worked, guys poked their heads in the door about every three minutes to see what he was doing that night.

"Camaraderie at Apache was just the coolest," he said. "Everybody was everybody else's best friend. I don't ever want to leave them."

But he thinks about the friends who left him. One evening, he had a buddy tattoo "strength" and "honor" down the insides of his forearms — just as Sgt. Willsun Mock had done before he died Oct. 22, 2006, from a roadside bomb.

And he remembers June 21, the day five friends died when a deep-buried IED destroyed a Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

"I try not to think about that day, but everything I do brings it up," DeNardi said. Because he organized the singing and playing, he couldn't do either without remembering a friend. But his anger had mellowed into sadness.

He doesn't believe Adhamiya was worth their loss. The Iraqis need to fight for themselves, he said, and he didn't see that.

He plans to get out of the military to become a history teacher.

"When I look back, nothing can stop me," DeNardi said. "I'm lucky I made it through Adhamiya — Iraq. I'm not going to waste the rest of my life sitting around in a hammock."


At his apartment, Sgt. Ely Chagoya pulled out his guitar. After months of not playing, emotion seeped from the guitar to his fingers and up through his voice. He sang a mournful piece he wrote in Spanish about a homeless man who returned to the same park bench each day; that was where his lover said to meet her, and he waited his whole life. But feeling the emotions behind his song scared him. "The moment you start feeling is the moment you'll

start remembering," he said.

He worried about his family. The last he had heard, his brother and sister were being deported. His parents, originally from Mexico, had their green cards, and Chagoya had been born in the States, but his siblings had not. "I feel like I'm fighting for our freedom, but there's none for me," he said. "I got the news at Apache. I just wanted to turn in my weapon and quit."

But he wouldn't quit his friends. "My main mission was to bring my soldiers back," he said. "That's why I went out."

Spc. Armando Cardenas hit the dance floor at a local club, solemn-faced as he moved to the merengue, sharply dressed, eyes flashing behind his scholarly wire glasses. He and Chagoya took over the floor, switched out partners, and danced as if the sound of salsa hadn't brought tears a week before as they thought about their buddy Mock. Mock had loved to dance. Chagoya danced, smooth and elegant, the star of the show, as Cardenas sat on a low couch to watch. His eyes grew even darker as he remembered.



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18 Army Times December 24, 2007