

# BLOOD BROTHERS

## Brothers

From previous page

At the battalion level, officers called the unit's presence in Adhamiya a success story, and cited the 27 high-value targets they caught, the 47 weapons caches they found, the 850 or so combat awards they earned and the hundreds of tips they received from Iraqis — though the tips often came after the fact.

"[The soldiers] may not see it, but I think if you do look at the big picture, they'll see we did make a difference," said Capt. Cecil Strickland, Charlie Company commander.

Adhamiya did not change drastically until after Charlie lost five men to an improvised explosive device on June 21, and someone higher up the chain sent a 1,000-man battalion to cover an area Charlie Company had been patrolling with 110.

"Everybody started paying attention: 'Oh my God. There's only three platoons in Adhamiya,'" Strickland said.

But he's proud of those three platoons.

"We were catching bad guys left and right — almost nightly," he said. "Each of my platoons had a different personality. If I wanted to find somebody, it was 3rd Platoon. If I wanted to find something, it was 2nd Platoon. If I wanted to lay the smack down, it was 1st Platoon."

### Getting it out of their systems

They came home to Germany from Iraq in October, each flight delivering another wave of soldiers to the gymnasium at Conn Barracks, where a smoke machine and screams from friends and family filled the air around them. Then, and only then, came the freedom to go where they wanted for the first time in 15 months. No body armor, no bombs, no port-a-johns.

No one knew quite what awaited him, but each scattered to find out.

Within 24 hours, several soldiers lined up at the military police station in Schweinfurt. Some scouts had gotten into a fistfight with a



The remainder of 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, and elements of Task Force 1-77, arrive at Ramstein Air Base in Germany after deployment to Baghdad.

civilian who questioned their role in Iraq. Within days, other soldiers refused to show up at formation — mostly because they were hung over. Strickland smiled a little at his men's sudden change from trusted battle-proven veterans to 20-year-old troublemakers.

"Personally, I think there should be a cooling-off area," he said. "Isolate them in a controlled environment: 'Here's your beer. Try to get it out of your systems.'"

But sitting in his new office — he took over as Charlie's commander midtour — Strickland worked to get the experience out of his system, too. "When I do think about it, I mentally go off somewhere," he said. "You're trying to give a general overview of what happened, but it's a microscopic detail running through your mind."

And there's always something to remind him. "Two nights ago, I got a call asking for [Spc. Gabriel] Garcia to escort [Sgt. Alphonso] Montenegro's remains," he said. "They finally put the pieces together." Montenegro was among the five killed by the IED on June 21.

Just before Halloween, Capt. Mike Baka's daughter tore off the

last link of a paper chain that had helped her count the days until her daddy came home. Elizabeth, 3, had wanted to know if he'd come home faster if she yanked apart all the links. She had slept on the floor of her mother's bedroom since he left 15 months before, and she'd prayed every night for the 14 men who had died in his company.

"What happened to some of daddy's friends while they were gone?" asked Cathy Baka.

"They were killed," Elizabeth answered. But then Cathy Baka shook her head in sudden awe of the life ahead for her family.

"How do you explain death to a 3-year-old?" she said.

The Bakas met when both were cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Cathy Baka later resigned her commission to raise a family. In eight years of marriage, the couple has spent just four together.

"It's hard," she said. "Feeling alone. Nighttime. Being an ocean away." From across that ocean, she watched for signs of problems. "I always ask him point-blank," she said. "I know he's suffered from PTSD."

Baka served as company commander for the first nine months of Charlie's deployment before moving to the battalion S-1 shop. When he came home, Cathy and Elizabeth, with 10-month-old Hannah, met him at the gym, all grins and tears.

When it got hard in Iraq — when he'd lost a soldier — he would call his wife.

"She's the one person I could talk with or cry with on the phone, other than the moms," he said. "It wasn't until after I talked with the family that I had the emotional release. I'd ask them what they know. A lot of times, it's nothing. It's bare bones. I'd say, 'Do you want to know more?' I haven't talked to a family yet that didn't want to know."

He plans to honor, in his own way, the soldiers of the company who commanded who gave their lives in Iraq; he plans to visit each of the 14 graves.

### Emptiness at home and at heart

Sgt. Erik Osterman picked up his 2005 Jeep from the shop — it needed a fresh battery — and then pattered down the Autobahn at 55 mph to break it in. Puffs of

**MORE ONLINE**

For video and photo galleries, and to read Parts 1, 2 and 3, visit [www.armytimes.com/bloodbrothers](http://www.armytimes.com/bloodbrothers)

smoke trailed behind him. Home wasn't quite that yet. Home. His wife, Sgt. 1st Class Tonya Osterman, was still in Iraq, and the house was empty.

They met on a previous deployment in Samarra, where they'd seen each other often. They married March 25, 2005. But this trip lacked the closeness they'd found in Samarra. He deployed in August 2006, and she deployed a month later. Even though they

See **BROTHERS** Page 18

