

BLOOD BROTHERS

Brothers

From Page 18

Humvees with Charlie Company's scout platoon and pulled out of the compound.

Spc. Tyler Holladay and the other medics prepared the aide station, while everyone left at Apache set up stretchers and tried to create enough shade for a large number of casualties. Apache baked in 111-degree heat that day, and medics distributed water as everyone waited.

For an hour.

Then 30 more minutes.

"You pretty much knew nobody was coming back," Holladay said. "But we thought they were still trapped, still fighting."

Several soldiers, including DeNardi, sat with the guards at the gate listening to the radio.

"This is taking way too long," a soldier in the aide station said. "They should have been here by now."

They busied themselves with a wounded Iraqi girl. The blast had killed three children and an Iraqi woman in homes nearby.

"I don't even care," Spc. Armando Cardenas said. "I know that's wrong, but they knew it was there. There's no way they didn't know it was there."

The bomb was within 300 yards of an Iraqi Army checkpoint, and it was big enough to flip a 30-ton Bradley upside-down and leave a hole the size of a Humvee. Somebody had spent some time digging, and somebody had seen it.

Outside the gate, small-arms fire sounded continuously as U.S. helicopters flew overhead waiting to evacuate the wounded. They shot off flares as the insurgents tried to shoot them down.

Then, another explosion.

Choi's truck had been hit by yet another IED. The blast broke both of his truck commander's legs. Choi had been responding to Charlie's call for help with the 554th Military Police Company, 95th Military Police Battalion.

More gunfire. Still no word on Wood's men. Charlie Company lined up against the wall with arms around each other, smoking cigarettes, trying to believe. But DeNardi had been listening to the radio. He stalked past and hurled

a magazine into a wall. "They're all gone," he said, and kept walking.

Another explosion.

An RPG hit the driver's side of one of the MP vehicles, decapitating Spc. Karen Clifton, a 22-year-old soldier from Fort Myers, Fla., who had hoped someday to be a state trooper. Four more MPs came into Apache to be treated for smoke inhalation.

As wave after wave of despair hit Apache, Baka got the news back at the S-3 shop at nearby Camp Taji.

"I looked at my NCO," he said. "I knew it was Charlie."

When he heard Wood's name, he whipped his soft cap against the wall. The ballistic eye protection inside shattered. "I was able to get some soldiers out of this fight because of [Expiration Time of Service] dates," he said. "Wood was one I couldn't." Wood had been stop-lossed, ordered to serve beyond the date he otherwise was supposed to be discharged from the Army.

As he waited for more news, Baka learned a dear friend, Maj. Sid Brookshire, had been killed the day before by an IED in Baghdad.

"It was the worst day in our his-



Soldiers with Charlie 1-26, which suffered more war deaths than any unit since Vietnam, helped each other cope with the loss of friends.

tory," Baka said.

Johnson and his QRF arrived at Wood's Bradley in time to see medic Pfc. Timothy Ray trying to get past flames and gunfire to get to the vehicle. But the flames were too hot and too high. Johnson's best friend, Agami, struggled to get out from underneath the

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30-ton Bradley, which was resting on his legs.

"The turret came off the Bradley," Johnson said. "[The guys] had to watch Agami try to get out of that hatch for 10 minutes. I'm never going to forget seeing him like that."

The 25-year-old soldier from Coconut Creek, Fla., burned alive as he tried to escape.

At Apache, Strickland ordered all of Charlie Company to go inside the main building. Sgt. Erik Osterman remained outside to



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