

BLOOD BROTHERS

speak up for his guys and ask for more time. But when he came back, it was with orders to report to Old Mod.

Ybay said he tried to persuade his men to go out, but he could see they were not ready.

"It was like a scab that wouldn't heal up," Ybay said. "I couldn't force them to go out. Listening to them in the mental health session, I could hear they're not ready."

At 2 a.m., Ybay said, he'd found his men sitting outside smoking cigarettes. They could not sleep. Some of them were taking as many as 10 sleeping pills and still could not rest. The images of their dead friends haunted them. The need for revenge ravaged them.

But Ybay was still disappointed in his men. "I had a mission," he said. "The company had a mission. We still had to execute. But I understood their side, too."

Somehow, the full course of events didn't make it to Strickland. All he knew, the commander said, was his men had refused an order, and he was determined to get them to Apache.

"When you're given an order, you've got to execute," Strickland said. "Being told, 'They're not coming,' versus, 'They're taking meds and went to mental health,' are different things. It was just this weird situation where almost nothing connected."

A revolt in the ranks

"They called it an act of mutiny," Cardenas said, still enraged that the men he considered heroes were, in his mind, slandered. "The sergeant major and the battalion commander said we were unprofessional. They said they were disappointed in us and would never forget our actions for the rest of their lives."

But no judicial action ever came of it.

"Captain Strickland read us our rights," DeNardi said. "We had 15 yes-or-no questions, and no matter how you answered them, it looked like you disobeyed an order. No one asked what happened. And there's no record — no Article 15. Nothing to show it happened."

After the members of 2nd Platoon had spent a year fighting for

each other and watching their buddies die, battalion leaders began breaking up the platoon. Seven noncommissioned officers were told they were being relieved for cause and moved out of the unit. Three noncommissioned officers stayed at Old Mod. Two, including Sgt. Derrick Jorcke, would remain in Iraq for one month after 2nd Platoon went home in October because they had been moved to different battalions in different areas of Iraq.

"In a way, they were put someplace where they wouldn't have to go out again," Johnson said. "But as an NCO, they took these guys' leaders away and put them with people they didn't know and trust. You knew 2nd Platoon would die for you without a second's hesitation. That's what made them so great. These guys need each other."

Then, they were all flagged: No promotions. No awards. No favorable actions.

"We had PFCs miss [promotion to] specialist for two months," DeNardi said. "Bronze Stars and [Army Commendation Medals]

were put on hold. You're talking about heroes like Cardenas. These are guys who save lives and they can't get awards."

"I didn't want to punish them," Strickland said. "I understood what was going on. But they had to understand you couldn't do something like that and have nothing happen."

And things could not continue as they had. Strickland could not operate for three more months with a platoon that refused to go out.

"Within the company, we made some adjustments," Strickland said. "They needed a fresh start. After looking into it, I didn't feel the need to punish anybody." However, he left the flags in place.

"If anything was going to be punishment, that was it," he said. For at least one soldier, that meant going through a promotion board again. Jorcke lost his promotion table status, but Strickland signed a memo re-establishing it. "I've tried to fix those issues. Almost everybody else has been promoted except one guy." Jorcke made his E-6 on Nov. 1.

Even after the "mutiny," Strickland said, he had a great deal of admiration for his soldiers.

"I understood why they did what they did," he said. "Some of the NCOs, I was disappointed in them because they failed to lead their soldiers through difficult times. They let their soldiers influence their decisions. But on a personal level, I applauded their decision because they stood behind their soldiers. I was disappointed, but I thought they had great courage. It was truly a Jekyll/Hyde moment for me."

And though they were horrified at being torn away from each other, the soldiers themselves were conflicted about the outcome.

"For us being disbanded, now we definitely had unfinished business," Jorcke said. "If we'd cleared Adhamiya, we could have said, 'I left Iraq and my buddies didn't die in vain.'"

"But in a way, the disbanding was good," he said. "We — what was left of the platoon — got to come back home alive." □

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