



Clockwise from left, Sgt. Jake Richardson, 26, returned to an empty apartment in Germany following his deployment to Iraq. His wife had returned to the States with his newborn child and most of the family belongings. Richardson says that many evenings he just sits at home and looks at his remaining family pictures. Spc. Shane Hornbeck shows off a tattoo of a bullet wound. His body armor stopped the bullet from actually penetrating. Spc. Tyler Holladay, like many soldiers returning from Iraq, visits a tattoo parlor in Schweinfurt, Germany. Holladay, who still bears the scars of a sniper's bullet, has a tattoo on his shoulder refreshed.

cussions — mild traumatic brain injuries — since the war in Iraq began.

'We did make a difference'

As Holladay recuperated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., he worried about getting released in time to see his friends return to Schweinfurt, Germany, 1-26's home as part of the 1st Infantry Division.

With his medical training, he understood what could lie ahead for his friends. In Iraq, he'd seen loud guys suddenly become quiet as they tried to deal with the stress. He knew his friends had memorized the series of questions and answers medics ask to check for TBI. He worried they would come home and drink too much and drive too fast. He worried that, away from the constant close contact they'd had with other soldiers at Apache, his friends would fall apart.

"I needed to see everybody's face and see that they were really OK," he said. "They'll cope with it for the rest of their lives."

Each Charlie Company soldier who patrolled the streets of Adhamiya experienced the blast of a roadside bomb at least twice — some as many as a dozen times, according to the soldiers. The blasts left them bleeding from the ears, suffering violent headaches or unable to concentrate. Each had experienced the death of a friend. And most had returned fire on the enemy. As they redeployed, they would go through several briefings: a screening for traumatic brain injury. A questionnaire for post-traumatic stress disorder. A session with a mental health therapist about warning signs. They would rush through, wanting only more time with their families or more time with their friends in the barracks. At least two would be diagnosed with TBI.

See **BROTHERS** next page

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VIDEO

- Spc. Tyler Holladay, back home, talks about his wounds and concerns for his fellow troops.
- Sgt. Jake Richardson talks about his combat tour and coming home to a troubled marriage.

PHOTO GALLERIES

An intimate look at the combat vets of Charlie 1-26.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Staff writer Kelly Kennedy and photographers James J. Lee and Rick Kozak first met the soldiers at the heart of this story when they were in Adhamiya, Iraq, in the spring and summer of 2007.

They interviewed dozens of soldiers, family members and others in Iraq, Germany, Colorado and Washington, D.C., for this series.

This week

After 15 months in the war zone, the soldiers of Charlie 1-26 are back home in Germany. But leaving it all behind is not as easy as the flight from Baghdad.

Last week

Soldiers in 2nd Platoon, Charlie 1-26, consumed by grief and an urge for revenge, stage a mutiny against orders to run a dangerous mission.

Read Part 1

The soldiers of Charlie 1-26 constantly patrolled the volatile Baghdad neighborhood of Adhamiya and paid a heavy price. One soldier would be nominated posthumously for the Medal of Honor.

Read Part 2

Five members of Charlie 1-26 die inside a burning vehicle. The mounting casualty count wears down the fighting spirit of many in the unit.



ing up, so I had some internal bleeding," he said. "I knew what the chances for survival were. I was really scared."

As he started to fade out, he asked his gunner to relay a message to the other medics: "I love them and I'll miss them."

"Probably the greatest feeling in my life was to wake up," Holladay said. Doctors at a military hospital in Baghdad had stitched his intestines back together. He couldn't eat for several days, but would require no further surgery.

Holladay was the last member of 1-26 wounded in Adhamiya. In 15 months, 31 men from 1-26 were killed and 122 wounded, making it the hardest-hit battalion since the Vietnam War. Charlie Company suffered the most, with 14 men killed — most of them in Adhamiya, one attached to another company. Holladay had

served as one of Charlie's medics, but he remained at Apache when the company moved to the base established at the old Ministry of Defense.

"I could never get away from Sector 19," he said, referring to Adhamiya's roughest area. "And sure as hell, I got shot in Sector 19."

Hard memories, bad dreams

None of the men of Charlie 1-26 will ever get away from Adhamiya completely. The memories of what they saw, did and endured will stay with them forever, as with any combat veteran. Memories of the deaths of their friends, as well as of the insurgents they had to kill, are engraved in their psyches, waiting to be triggered by a car horn in a traffic jam, a popping balloon, a familiar face in an old photograph or dreams that can't be shaken.

Some will try to forget with drugs or alcohol. Some will let anger or guilt infect relationships with their spouses and families. Some will battle depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Many will experience short-term memory loss or uncontrollable emotions, possibly as a result of undiagnosed traumatic brain injuries.

A few may take their own lives. In 2006, suicide rates for soldiers leapt to a 26-year high with 99 deaths, one-fourth of them by troops diagnosed with PTSD, according to the Defense Department. Statistically, male veterans commit suicide at twice the rate of their nonveteran peers.

Defense Department research shows one-third of Iraq war veterans have sought help for mental health issues, and officials estimate 150,000 troops have suffered con-