

BLOOD BROTHERS

Brothers

From previous page

community college, and signed back up in 2004. His career as an infantryman would end permanently in Adhamiya.

Not like training

Nothing prepared Charlie Company for Adhamiya. They'd spent a week at Hohenfels training center in Germany learning to work with interpreters.

During the training, Capt. Mike Baka would talk to "the mayor" of a mock town, and an IED would go off nearby.

"I thought, 'No way is it going to be like this,'" Baka said. "I was exactly wrong."

Beyond that, the West Point grad said he was never trained in counterinsurgency methods. None, not even Baka, had read Gen. David Petraeus' counterinsurgency manual. But he had taken a year of Arabic in college, and he understood he had to interact with the locals to make it work.

At Apache, he'd roll into Adhamiya with one platoon, get back, and immediately roll out with a different platoon.

"I wanted to show a little bit of love for the platoons, but also to talk to the people," he said. He'd play chess with the locals or talk with them about their families. But if he stayed too long, they would inevitably catch sniper fire.

"It was a rare day if we didn't see [Iraqis] get killed or severely injured," he said. "It was almost like they were testing us. We'd be two streets away, and shots would ring out. It was always gunshot wounds to their heads."

One day, local Iraqis covered a body on the sidewalk with cardboard.



Sgt. Joshua Caiado, right, a member of Charlie 1-26, runs beside an Iraqi Army soldier during the search for the insurgents that triggered a bomb that killed three U.S. soldiers in the Adhamiya neighborhood of Baghdad.

"But he jerked back up — he was still alive," Baka said.

Sgt. Kevin Guenther, Baka's medic, performed a tracheotomy on the man.

"The people all gathered around to watch, but no one tried to do anything," Baka said. "I actually got really angry. This man was left for dead. No one here will even call an ambulance. They were more concerned about the three or four men we were questioning."

The man died about half an hour later. He'd been shot in the head.

The soldiers were tasked with joint patrols with the Iraqi army, but the Iraqi army didn't go out enough for there to be much

"joint" involved.

"They'd set up a mission with us, but then they'd have an excuse: 'No gas.' 'It's too dangerous.' 'We don't have enough guys,'" said Spc. Gerry DeNardi, 20, the company smart aleck with high cheekbones and a mop of hair bleached by the sun.

"We had to pick up an Iraqi body once at Remy [Street] because they said they were out of gas, but then they rolled past us as we were coming back in."

Most of the soldiers were Shiite. "To join the army, you had to go to western Baghdad," Baka explained. "No Sunnis would go there. But the corruption in the Shia military was horrendous."

The Iraqi army would trash

Sunni houses, take people into custody who hadn't done anything wrong and forcefully demand bribes, Baka said.

'How does that make you feel?'

Charlie Company patrolled constantly — each guy went out three or four times a day, with a one-and-a-half-hour break between patrols.

The soldiers teased each other just as constantly, a way to break the relentless stress and fear.

Pfc. Ross McGinnis, the youngest member of the company at 19, at first annoyed just about everyone.

"He just wanted to learn so much," said his team leader, Newland. "He was always on and

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intense. But then he was so much fun."

McGinnis spent weekends with Newland and his family in Schweinfurt, playing with Newland's children, Dryden and Haley, and trying to answer Newland's plethora of Army trivia questions.

He soon emerged as a joker — big brown eyes flashing above a bigger grin. In Iraq, he recorded a mock interview with a friend who had been slightly wounded — asking in his best Dan Rather voice, without a trace of a grin, "How does that make you feel?"

As he became more confident in his job as a .50-cal gunner, he bragged. Sitting on the edge of his Humvee, he held up the round from an M4 — about two inches long — and then the .50-cal round, twice as long, twice as thick.

"This is your round," he chanted, holding up the tiny bullet. "And this is my round. Your round. My round."

Another day, Staff Sgt. Ely Chagoya, 31, decided to drill his team on how quickly they could

Below, buddies of Pfc. Ross McGinnis, seen in these three photos, say he was always in good spirits and described the .50-cal gunner's preparations for the possibility that a grenade could be tossed into his Humvee.

PHOTOS COURTESY MEMBERS OF CHARLIE CO., 1ST BATTALION, 26TH INFANTRY REGIMENT

