

# BLOOD BROTHERS

## Brothers

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tenced to eight years in jail and a dishonorable discharge, ending his 17-year Army career.

DeNardi and Wood both complained that the surge — five additional combat brigades sent into Baghdad — hadn't reached Adhamiya, where Charlie 1-26 patrolled one of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods. And they didn't understand why they couldn't attack the Abu Hanifa Mosque, even when they could see insurgents shooting at them from the holy site. Politics, they said, held them back. Politics meant they had to ask permission from the Iraqi government. Politics dictated that they provide comfort to known insurgents.

"They won't let us do our jobs," DeNardi said. "You have to finish the war part before you can start the peace part."

Together, DeNardi and Wood wrote "Adhamiya Blues," and they had to sing it together because DeNardi knew the music and Wood knew the lyrics:

*Adhamiya Blues*

*War, it degrades the heart and poisons the mind*

*And we're tossed aside by governments' lies.*

*But we continue to grieve.*

Politics would soon become an issue within Charlie Company, too.

### Unwelcome change of command

Baka knew since before he left Germany that he would give up command of Charlie Company while in Iraq. Army leadership wanted to give as many commanders as possible experience leading in combat by rotating them through companies, and after 24 months as company commander, Baka's time was up.

Yanking respected commanders out midtour can set back a combat unit, and so it was with Charlie 1-26.

"When you leave and they trust you, they feel slighted," Baka said of his men. "If you have a company like mine, you don't take out the team captain and expect the rest of the team to operate."

Baka spent the majority of his time out on patrol with his guys, often participating in firefights. Most days, he didn't take a break — just hopped in a vehicle with the next group going out.

But when Capt. Cecil Strickland arrived to replace him seven months into the deployment, the mission changed. So did the lead-



JAMES J. LEE/STAFF

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ership style. Baka had treated his men like friends, but Strickland, a former enlisted soldier who had always dreamed of commanding a rifle company, kept a certain distance between his officers and soldiers.

The men missed their old commander.

"We didn't want him to leave," Johnson said. "[Strickland's] a totally different leader. He leads through planning. Baka leads through execution."

"Mike's very charismatic," Strickland said. "There's always going to be that bond with Charlie Company. I'm a fool if I think I'm going to walk in and say, 'Cut ties. You're mine now.'"

But as the surge took hold last spring, Strickland said he was required to plan more night raids in



Spc. Gerry DeNardi, top, recently home from 15 months in Iraq with Charlie 1-26, says movies such as "300" help him decompress from the emotional fallout of a long, hard war tour. Above, medics and others tend to soldiers wounded by attacks on their patrols last June in the Adhamiya area of Baghdad.

search of high-value targets and coordinate joint raids with special operations units. That meant he spent most of his time in the operations room, planning missions. He went out on four or five patrols a week, compared to Baka's daily patrols.

Strickland had tried to get to know the guys before he arrived, but it was hard because he had spent little time in Adhamiya, hav-

ing served with the battalion at another FOB. It became even harder to bond when, four days after the March 9 change-of-command ceremony, he lost his first soldier.

### 'Something was going to happen'

On March 13, Sgt. Ely Chagoya went out on patrol with Pfc. Alberto Garcia Jr. Garcia was the good soldier, always carrying a Bible and always the one to get a

job done without being asked, said his boss, Sgt. Jake Richardson. But he had a playful side, too. A week after Garcia touched a guitar for the first time, Richardson heard somebody playing Johnny Cash. Garcia had already bought himself a guitar and learned to play it.

But March 13, some of the Charlie 1-26 soldiers had a bad feeling. Including Chagoya.

"We would get hunches: 'I don't