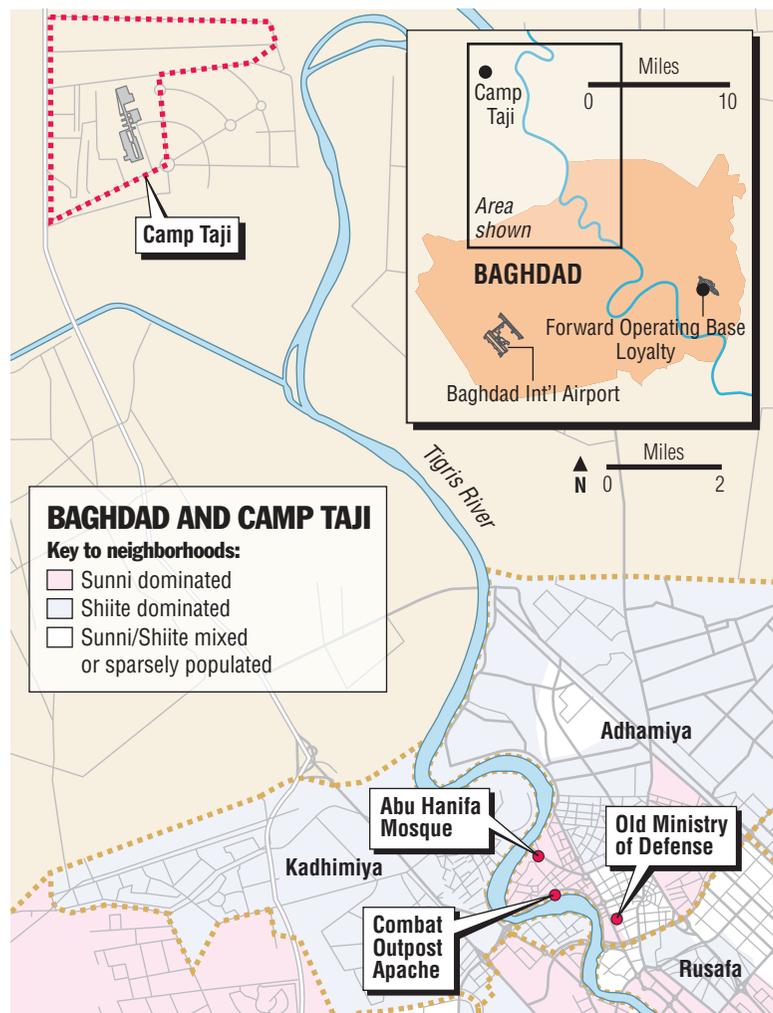




BLOOD BROTHERS

REFUSED TO ROLL

Soldiers with 2nd Platoon, Charlie 1-26, revolted against orders to leave quarters at Camp Taji to patrol their former area of Adhamiya. They were worried that, emotionally distraught by the loss of many friends, they would take revenge on innocent Iraqis.



Source: Humanitarian Information Center for Iraq

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF

five men, including a respected senior non-commissioned officer. Master Sgt. Jeffrey McKinney, Alpha Company's first sergeant, was known as a family man and as a good leader because he was intelligent and could explain things well. But Staff Sgt. Jeremy Rausch of Charlie Company's 1st Platoon, a good friend of McKinney's, said McKinney told him he felt he was letting his men down in Adhamiya.

"First Sergeant McKinney was kind of a perfectionist and this was bothering him very much," Rausch said. On July 11, McKinney was ordered to lead his men on a foot patrol to clear the roads of IEDs. Everyone at Apache heard the call come in from Adhamiya, where Alpha Company had picked up the same streets Charlie had left. Charlie's 1st Platoon had also remained be-



McKinney

hind, and Rausch said he would never forget the fear he heard in McKinney's driver's voice:

"This is Apache seven delta," McKinney's driver said in a panicked voice over the radio. "Apache seven just shot himself. He just shot himself. Apache seven shot himself."

Rausch said there was no misunderstanding what had happened.

According to Charlie Company soldiers, McKinney said, "I can't take it anymore," and fired a round. Then he pointed his M4 under his chin and killed himself in front of three of his men.

At Old Mod, Charlie Company was called back in for weapons training, DeNardi said. They were told it was an accident. Then they were told it was under investiga-

See **BROTHERS** next page

Leadership in the midst of loss

At home, Cathy Baka helped the Charlie 1-26 wives cope

The first time Capt. Mike Baka called home from Iraq, his 3-year-old daughter Elizabeth put him in Time Out. "You made Mommy cry," she accused.

Over the course of her husband's deployment, Cathy Baka would cry again and again as she tried to comfort the families of the soldiers killed while serving with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, her husband's unit.

Mike Baka commanded Charlie 1-26 for eight of the unit's 15 months in Iraq, as they battled their way through the insurgent-filled streets of Adhamiya in northeastern Baghdad. Part of the 1st Infantry Division, Charlie 1-26 would come home as the hardest hit Army company in the Iraq war, losing 14 men to snipers, mortar rounds and roadside bombs. As commander's wife, Cathy Baka volunteered to lead the Family Readiness Group in the soldiers' home, Schweinfurt, Germany.

At first, she concentrated on teaching the wives of her husband's infantrymen how to read an Army pay statement, or how to pay an electric bill in Germany. She talked to her husband each night, and she'd pass on messages for the soldiers, or let Mike Baka know when one of the wives was having problems so he could talk to the husband. But she also set up sessions to explain how the wives would be notified if their husbands died in combat — by Army casualty notification officers.

Until then, it hadn't occurred to her that someone would have to tell the rest of the families.

Normally, someone from the rear detachment would call each person in the Family Readiness Group and read a formal statement. But the Charlie Company wives — Charlie's Angels — decided they wanted more than that.

At first, the women acted as a support group. When someone was killed in Iraq, the unit would go into blackout mode until immedi-



JAMES J. LEE/STAFF

Capt. Mike Baka, the popular former commander of Charlie 1-26, led his men through some of the deadliest fighting in the war in Iraq as his wife, Cathy, helped other spouses cope with the difficult deployment of their loved ones.

ate family members were notified. Though that common practice was designed to prevent family members from learning about a soldier's death unofficially, such as via e-mail or an Internet posting, it caused great anxiety at home. The sudden silence — no phone calls from a spouse or other unit members, no e-mails or other communication — left a sense of foreboding.

"Family members would see MySpace go quiet," Baka said. "They'd call and I'd say, 'I just heard from Mike,' or, 'I haven't heard from Mike either, so let's just pray.'"

Mike Baka called her every night, and she often knew when something had happened before anyone else did. She was his support system, his way of letting out emotions before having to face his men. The couple met at West Point where they both were cadets and married eight years ago. When Cathy gave birth to Elizabeth, her first child, she resigned her commission to take care of the family, which now includes a second daughter, Hannah.

"We pretty much talk about everything," she said. "Maybe too much. But it helped me support the families."

She worked harder to make sure the families felt informed, creating newsletters with photo pages and, eventually, memorials.

Though she spent time trying to ready herself for the shock of a lost young man, the first death caught her by surprise.

Staff Sgt. Garth Sizemore was

fatally shot Oct. 17, three months into Charlie 1-26's deployment. Though the Army notified Sizemore's wife, Lena, Cathy Baka called the wives of all of his friends.

"I knew Sizemore and Lena very well," Baka said. "I probably cried on two or three calls. I was not prepared for Lena."

Lena Sizemore had gone to all the monthly Family Readiness Group meetings and was a favorite among the Charlie Company wives. Two of them immediately rushed to be by her side.

"Lena was loved by everyone," Baka said. "We were her friends, and we were there."

As the deaths became more common, Cathy Baka received phone calls from scared family members.

The focus of the family group changed to grief counseling. As she continued making notification calls, she faced other challenges. Couples went through divorces. Wounded soldiers returned to Schweinfurt. The battalion commander's 15-year-old son died from a heart condition.

"Life goes on," she said, "but when something happens during a war, it's intensified."

In March, her husband moved to Headquarters Company, and the position of Family Readiness Group leader moved to the new commander's wife, Bettie Strickland. But after yet another death, the two women worked together. For Cathy Baka, Charlie Company was still family. □