



PHOTOS BY RICK KOZAK/MILITARY TIMES

Medics with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division treat wounded soldiers at the Forward Operating Base Apache aid station June 21 in eastern Baghdad.

ies. One died this month.

"It's devastating to think about," Oclander said. "The thing that leaders suffer about is that these kids are going to be permanently scarred."

Staying sane

Ray was there the day of the fire. Someone like him always is.

At least one medic is on every patrol, said Sgt. Major William Rost, MND-B's chief medical non-commissioned officer, who is with the division surgeon's office of the 1st Cavalry Division. And most patrols also have one or two combat lifesavers who usually have been trained by the medics.

Ray became a medic after finding out he was colorblind.

"I wanted to be a pilot, but now I'm here," he said, grinning as usual. "Life throws you hardballs."

He works with two other medics: Pfc. Sean Lawson and Jonathan Hewitt, who go out in shifts on patrol, as well as four more experienced soldiers who work at the aid station, most on their second tour in Iraq.



Pfc. Timothy Ray, a line medic with Charlie Company, patrols with his company June 21 in eastern Baghdad.

Because their platoon mates expect the medics to be like the doctor back home — calm, wise, able to hear anything — the medics depend on each other to stay sane.

Sgt. 1st Class Chad Smith, 28, works at the aid station, but also goes out on patrol with the civil affairs team. He speaks in a deep, soft voice, exuding the calm his people need.

"They're not just dealing with gunshot wounds anymore," he said of the medics. "Now it's burns, head injuries and blast injuries."

Such injuries can be more difficult to deal with than gunshots. In training, he said, the medics try to desensitize themselves by looking at pictures of what they'll be exposed to.

Still, "There's no way to simulate what you're going to go through," Smith said.

But they can relate to each other's experiences, and they know each other well. If they can, they offer each other space, some time off or just an ear to listen.

In some ways, looking out for everybody else helps, Ray said. The troops in his platoon often come to talk to him about nightmares or trouble sleeping.

It's not as stressful for him to listen to the problems of others as some might think, he said.

"We try not to talk about the bad things," he said. "The bad things are pushed aside and talked about when necessary."

"I hand out plenty of Motrin and

water," he said, then laughs as a buddy in the back of the Bradley makes a request no good infantryman would fulfill.

"No back rubs," he said.

Just like any other soldier, the medics handle the stress of trauma in their own ways.

Lawson practically skips when he hears a call come in, and grins as he prepares to handle the wounded. "The first time it happened, I was shaking," he said. "Now when I get casualties, it relaxes me."

In the typical "I'm immortal" mind-set of a 20-year-old soldier, he's sure he'll remain safe.

"I've had a grenade land in my truck and kill my gunner," he said. "I was unconscious, but I woke up and treated the other guys. Ever since then, I'm calm. I almost died, and now it's like I'm invincible."

"The guys who are going out all the time — it amazes me at times that they're able to deal with it," Smith said. "It can be inspirational ... to see how much an individual can overcome."

'Tunnel vision'

Ray said he gets "tunnel vision" when things get bad. He focuses intensely on the patient he's helping and trusts his platoon to cover him.

"The night we lost [Pfc. Ryan] Hill, I had [incoming] grenades, RPGs and small arms," Ray said.

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Sgt. Robbie Flowers, of Buffalo, N.Y., a medic with Charlie Company, moved with his team from FOB Apache to FOB Taji.

For medics, battlefield is hard to endure, hard to leave

FORWARD OPERATING BASE TAJI, Iraq — After nine months during which they saw nine deaths and 285 injuries, the aid-station medics at Forward Operating Base Apache decided to move out.

"It's a pretty bad area," said Sgt. Terence Kupau, 28. "I didn't really like to see what we were seeing."

But when their command offered to move each of them out of Apache, they refused until they could depart as a team. Then, when they finally reached the relative safety of Forward Operating Base Taji, they found themselves suffering the guilt and boredom of men who leave the battlefield for a better place — like home.

"Now we're back to being regular old medics," said Staff Sgt. Branden De Sersa, 33. "We're limited to what we're really allowed to do. We could be doing something better."

In a microcosm of military culture, the four men are examples of how difficult it can be to move from a combat role to the routine. But the transition to home may come a little more easily for them after moving from an infantry environment to garrison-like positions that give them the chance to talk to each other about their experiences, ease down to a slower pace, and define their roles in the war before returning to their families.

In Adhamiyah, one of the many violent areas of Baghdad, the soldiers lived with about 130 other members of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry. It's an area known for the homes of Sunni generals

who retired there after serving Saddam Hussein. More recently, soldiers have seen Sunni-on-Sunni attacks there, as well as more violence against U.S. forces. So far, 14 Apache soldiers have died.

At Adhamiyah, the medics could help — even save — their friends. At Taji, all they can do is watch news reports. As they sat surrounded by pool tables and televisions at a morale, welfare and recreation center, they talked of the loss of their "real" work for the jobs they now hold, handing out aspirin to sick-call soldiers. Four new medics rotated in to fill their slots at Apache.

In their nine months together, they grew close enough to give each other nicknames. At the aid station, they removed the privacy curtains between their cots and set them around a main table to share meals, games and paperwork.

"We tore the barriers down," De Sersa said. "We wanted to see each other."

They joined the military for different reasons. Sgt. Robbie Flowers, 25, joined the Army after serving in the Marines.

"I just remember that our medic was respected by everybody," said Flowers, who will soon enter the Green-to-Gold program to become a medical platoon leader. "He would take care of you."

Kupau had a choice between being an infantryman or a medic.

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