



by Kelly Kennedy - Staff writer
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Spc. Gerry DeNardi stood at the on-base Burger King, just a few miles from downtown Baghdad, hoping for a quick taste of home.

Camp Taji encompasses miles of scrapped Iraqi tanks, a busy U.S. airstrip and thousands of soldiers living in row upon row of identical trailers. Several fast-food stands, a PX and a dining facility the size of a football field compose Taji's social hub. The base had been struck by an occasional mortar round, and a rocket had hit the airfield two weeks before and killed an American helicopter pilot. But the quiet base brought on a sense of being far from roadside bombs, far from rocket-propelled grenades and far from the daily gunfire that rained down on the soldiers of Charlie 1-26 as they patrolled Adhamiya, a violent Sunni neighborhood in northeastern Baghdad.

Just two weeks earlier, the 20-year-old DeNardi had lost five good friends, killed together as they rode in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle that rolled over a powerful roadside bomb.

As DeNardi walked up the three wood steps to the outdoor stand to pick up his burger, the siren wailed.

Wah! Wah! Wah! "Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!"

The alarms went off all the time — often after the mortar round or rocket had struck nothing but sand, miles from anything important. Many soldiers and others at Taji had taken to ignoring the warnings. DeNardi glanced around at the picnic tables to make sure everyone was still eating. They were. The foreign nationals who worked the fast-food stands hadn't left; so he went back to get the burger he had paid for.

The mortar round hit before he could pick up his order.

"I turned around and all of Burger King and me went flying," DeNardi said.

He'd lived through daily explosions in 11 months with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, at nearby Combat Outpost Apache, a no-frills fortress smack in the middle of Adhamiya's hostile streets. He had rushed through flames to try to save friends and carried others to the aide station only to watch them die.

"I'm not getting killed at Burger King," he thought, and he dived for a concrete bunker. People were screaming. DeNardi saw a worker from Cinnabon hobbling around, so he climbed out of the bunker, pulled shrapnel out of the man's leg and bandaged him. The Pizza Hut manager was crying and said two more foreign workers were injured behind her stand — near the Burger King.

"Lightning doesn't strike twice," DeNardi said, "so I went back. But there were body parts everywhere." The first man's leg had been blown off, his other leg was barely attached and he had a chest wound. "He was going to die," DeNardi said.

The other wounded man had shrapnel to his neck. DeNardi peeled off his own shirt and fashioned a bandage out of it as other soldiers started streaming in to help.

Then, "all clear" sounded over the loudspeakers as medics arrived and took over.

"I'm covered in blood, but I still have my hamburger receipt," DeNardi said. "I went back to Burger King the next day, but they wouldn't give me my burger."

For all his dark humor, the "Hero of Burger King," as fellow soldiers teasingly called him, was deeply rattled by the carnage of the explosion at the fast-food court. At Apache, he expected trouble. But not at Burger King.

"That affected me," he said. For the next few days, he said, he slept in the

open-ended concrete bunkers positioned between the housing units.

It was just another bad day to add to many — and DeNardi's platoon had already faced misery that seemed unbearable. When five soldiers with 2nd Platoon were trapped June 21 after a deep-buried roadside bomb flipped their Bradley upside-down, several men rushed to save the gunner, Spc. Daniel Agami, pinned beneath the 30-ton vehicle. But they could only watch — and listen to him scream — as he burned alive. The Bradley was far too heavy to lift, and the flames were too high to even get close. The four others died inside the vehicle. Second Platoon already had lost four of its 45 men since deploying to Adhamiya 11 months before. June 21 shattered them.

Though their commanders moved them from the combat outpost to safer quarters, members of 2nd Platoon would stage a revolt they viewed as a life-or-death act of defiance. With all they had done and all they had seen, they now were consumed with an anger that ate at the memory of the good men they were when they arrived in Iraq.

PRIMED FOR REVENGE

After June 21, most of Charlie Company moved out of COP Apache, their makeshift home on the grounds of one of Saddam Hussein's son's palaces. At Taji, the company would try to recover for a new mission.

Sgt. 1st Class Tim Ybay, 38, served as 2nd Platoon's platoon sergeant, but also its father figure. The former drill sergeant teased constantly and tried to treat his men like family. At memorial services for lost soldiers, he cried the loudest. He'd been on patrol June 21 when the five 2nd Platoon soldiers died in the Bradley. When he came back, his grieving platoon circled him as the weight of the loss forced him to his knees in the sand. He'd promised to bring all his boys home.

Now he would concentrate on the ones that remained.

"I knew after losing those five guys, my platoon had to get out of there," he said. "These were the guys they slept with, joked with, worked out with. I don't think they'd be able to accomplish the mission."

The tears came again as he spoke, and he looked away.

"And I was having a hard time losing my guys."

At Taji, the company had a week off. DeNardi looked more surfer than soldier after a couple of days at the pool. Ybay and his sergeants sat at the picnic tables drinking frozen coffee concoctions. The guys bought Persian carpets and brass lamps to send home as souvenirs — as if Taji were a vacation spot. But the anger over Adhamiya emerged even poolside, and erupted at the mental health clinic, which they visited in groups.

"You never really get over the anger," said Staff Sgt. Robin Johnson, a member of Charlie's scout platoon who had been especially close to Agami. "It just kind of becomes everything you are. You become pissed off at everything. We wanted to destroy everything in our paths, but they wanted us to keep building sewer systems and handing out teddy bears."

Some of the younger members of the platoon were particularly disillusioned.

Spc. Armando Cardenas, 21, had taken honors classes in high school but feared college would bore him. He wanted something challenging and found it in the Army, in Iraq. As a soldier, he was the guy who leaped out of a truck to chase an insurgent, or instantly returned fire with an uncanny ability to tell where the rounds came from. When a friend, Pfc. Ryan Hill, was killed in battle, Cardenas helped carry him back.

But Cardenas' anger was just as quick as his heroics.

He said the platoon had been waiting for June 21 — that they had known they would eventually hit a big IED and have a catastrophic loss.

Cardenas wanted revenge. "But they don't let us take care of the people

responsible," he said. "It was a slap in the face."

Adhamiya remained under the control of 1-26, but the brass moved Charlie 1-26 to another combat outpost, Old Mod — so called because it used to house Iraq's Ministry of Defense — in a calmer area on the outskirts of Adhamiya. From there, they patrolled Kadhamiya.

"If my guys had stayed at Adhamiya, they would have taken the gloves off," said Capt. Cecil Strickland, Charlie's company commander. "We were afraid somebody was going to get in trouble."

There had been close calls before. DeNardi had to fight back a strong desire to kill an Iraqi — accused of triggering an IED that killed two Charlie Company soldiers — as he held a 9mm Glock handgun to the man's eye socket.

And Cardenas and Staff Sgt. John Gregory had been ordered to the Green Zone to talk to an investigator after they roughed up two insurgents. A week after Pfc. Ross McGinnis fatally threw himself on a grenade to save four friends, Cardenas and Gregory had chased a couple of guys on a scooter and managed to stop them. Cardenas kicked over a wooden box the two Iraqis stood next to.

"There was a grenade full of nails," Cardenas said. "We had to go see a major about detainee abuse. We told him [the Iraqis] didn't want to get in the Bradley."

Nothing came of the investigation.

Such incidents belied the squared-away record Charlie 1-26 posted during its deployment to Iraq. In 15 months, they had one incident when two soldiers were caught with alcohol, Strickland said, but that was all.

"I think the performance comes from the level of discipline," Strickland said. "And the discipline comes from the hardship. They're a little bit more mature than a lot of other units."

In Shiite Kadhamiya, Charlie Company found paved, clean streets. In Sunni Adhamiya, so many garbage collectors had been killed that the Shiite government workers refused to go there. "It was one road and one river away from Adhamiya," DeNardi said. "But there was civilization on one side and chaos on the other."

SUICIDE AND A TWIST OF FATE

Lt. Col. John Reynolds replaced Lt. Col. Eric Schacht as battalion commander July 8. Schacht left after his son died of a heart condition in Germany, the same day Charlie Company lost five men in the Bradley. Even with the high operations tempo and the loss of so many men, Reynolds called the changeover "easy."

"It was the best transition you could get," he said.

But within days, he would lose 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 behind, 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 investigation. And then they were told it was a suicide. Reynolds confirmed that McKinney took his own life.

A week later, without their beloved first sergeant, Alpha Company would experience its first catastrophic loss on a mission that, but for a change in weather, was supposed to go to Charlie Company.

On July 17, Charlie's 2nd Platoon was refitting at Taji when they got a call to go back to Adhamiya. They were to patrol Route Southern Comfort, which had been black — off-limits — for months. Charlie Company knew a 500-pound bomb lay on that route, and they'd been ordered not to travel it. "Will there be route clearance?" 2nd Platoon asked. "Yes," they were told. "Then we'll go."

But the mission was canceled. The medevac crews couldn't fly because of a dust storm, and the Iraqi Army wasn't ready for the mission. Second Platoon went to bed.

They woke to the news that Alpha Company had gone on the mission instead and one of their Bradleys rolled over the 500-pound IED. The Bradley flipped. The explosion and flames killed everybody inside. Alpha Company lost four soldiers: Spc. Zachary Clouser, Spc. Richard Gilmore, Spc. Daniel Gomez and Sgt. 1st Class Luis Gutierrez-Rosales.

"There was no chance," said Johnson, whose scouts remained at Apache and served as the quick-reaction force that day. "It was eerily the same as June 21. You roll up on that, and it looked the same."

The guys from Charlie Company couldn't help but think about the similarities — and that it could have been them.

"Just the fact that there was another Bradley incident mentally screwed up 2nd Platoon," Strickland said. "It was almost like it had happened to them."

The battalion gave 2nd Platoon the day to recover. then they were scheduled to go back out on patrol in Adhamiya on July 18.

But when Strickland returned from a mission, he learned 2nd Platoon had failed to roll.

"A scheduled patrol is a direct order from me," Strickland said.

"They're not coming," Strickland said he was told. "So I called the platoon sergeant and talked to him. 'Remind your guys: These are some of the things that could happen if they refuse to go out.' I was irritated they were thumbing their noses. I was determined to get them down there."

But, he said, he didn't know the whole platoon, except for Ybay, had taken sleeping medications prescribed by mental health that day, according to Ybay.

Strickland didn't know mental health leaders had talked to 2nd Platoon about "doing the right thing."

He didn't know 2nd Platoon had gathered for a meeting and determined they could no longer function professionally in Adhamiya — that several platoon members were afraid their anger could set loose a massacre.

"We said, 'No.' If you make us go there, we're going to light up everything," DeNardi said. "There's a thousand platoons. Not us. We're not going."

They decided as a platoon that they were done, DeNardi and Cardenas said, as did several other members of 2nd Platoon. At mental health, guys had told the therapist, "I'm going to murder someone." And the therapist said, "There comes a time when you have to stand up," 2nd Platoon members remembered. For the sake of not going to jail, the platoon decided they had to be "unplugged."

Ybay had gone to battalion to speak up for his guys and ask for more time. But when he came back, it was with orders to report to Old Mod.

Ybay said he tried to persuade his men to go out, but he could see they were not ready.

"It was like a scab that wouldn't heal up," Ybay said. "I couldn't force them to go out. Listening to them in the mental health session, I could hear they're not ready."

At 2 a.m, Ybay said, he'd found his men sitting outside smoking cigarettes. They could not sleep. Some of them were taking as many as 10 sleeping pills and still could not rest. The images of their dead friends haunted them. The need for revenge ravaged them.

But Ybay was still disappointed in his men. "I had a mission," he said. "The company had a mission. We still had to execute. But I understood their side, too."

Somehow, the full course of events didn't make it to Strickland. All he knew, the commander said, was his men had refused an order, and he was determined to get them to Apache.

"When you're given an order, you've got to execute," Strickland said. "Being told, 'They're not coming,' versus, 'They're taking meds and went to mental health,' are different things. It was just this weird situation where almost nothing connected."

A REVOLT IN THE RANKS

"They called it an act of mutiny," Cardenas said, still enraged that the men he considered heroes were, in his mind, slandered. "The sergeant major and the battalion commander said we were unprofessional. They said they were disappointed in us and would never forget our actions for the rest of their lives."

But no judicial action ever came of it.

"Captain Strickland read us our rights," DeNardi said. "We had 15 yes-or-no questions, and no matter how you answered them, it looked like you disobeyed an order. No one asked what happened. And there's no record — no article 15. Nothing to show it happened."

After the members of 2nd Platoon had spent a year fighting for each other and watching their buddies die, battalion leaders began breaking up the platoon. Seven noncommissioned officers were told they were being relieved for cause and moved out of the unit. Three noncommissioned officers stayed at Old Mod. Two, including Sgt. Derrick Jorcke, would remain in Iraq for one month after 2nd Platoon went home in October because they had been moved to different battalions in different areas of Iraq.

"In a way, they were put someplace where they wouldn't have to go out again," Johnson said. "But as an NCO, they took these guys' leaders away and put them with people they didn't know and trust. You knew 2nd Platoon would die for you without a second's hesitation. That's what made them so great. These guys need each other."

Then, they were all flagged: No promotions. No awards. No favorable actions.

"We had PFCs miss [promotion to] specialist for two months," DeNardi said. "Bronze Stars and [Army Commendation Medals] were put on hold. You're talking about heroes like Cardenas. These are guys who save lives and they can't get awards."

"I didn't want to punish them," Strickland said. "I understood what was going on. But they had to understand you couldn't do something like that and have nothing happen."

And things could not continue as they had. Strickland could not operate for three more months with a platoon that refused to go out.

"Within the company, we made some adjustments," Strickland said. "They needed a fresh start. After looking into it, I didn't feel the need to punish anybody."

However, he left the flags in place.

“If anything was going to be punishment, that was it,” he said. For at least one soldier, that meant going through a promotion board again. Jorcke lost his promotion table status, but Strickland signed a memo re-establishing it. “I’ve tried to fix those issues. Almost everybody else has been promoted except one guy.” Jorcke made his E-6 on Nov. 1.

Even after the “mutiny,” Strickland said, he had a great deal of admiration for his soldiers.

“I understood why they did what they did,” he said. “Some of the NCOs, I was disappointed in them because they failed to lead their soldiers through difficult times. They let their soldiers influence their decisions. But on a personal level, I applauded their decision because they stood behind their soldiers. I was disappointed, but I thought they had great courage. It was truly a Jekyll/Hyde moment for me.”

And though they were horrified at being torn away from each other, the soldiers themselves were conflicted about the outcome.

“For us being disbanded, now we definitely had unfinished business,” Jorcke said. “If we’d cleared Adhamiya, we could have said, ‘I left Iraq and my buddies didn’t die in vain.’”

“But in a way, the disbanding was good,” he said. “We — what was left of the platoon — got to come back home alive.”

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