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## DADE SOLDIERS: BLOODIED BUT WHOLE

By DANIEL de VISE

They were the Lords of Ramadi.

One hundred twenty-six men of the Florida National Guard, men who fixed cars for a living, or sold air conditioners, or wrote traffic tickets. Weekend soldiers, thrown together for 14 months to fight a war "in the worst place on earth."

They were the third company - Charlie Company - of the First Battalion of the 124th Infantry Regiment of the Florida National Guard, based in North Miami. They came home with more Purple Hearts, 23, than any other company in the 12,000-member state military force.

They came home alive, every one. But one man was conspicuously absent when the buses rolled in from Fort Stewart in Georgia: Sgt. Camilo Mejia, absent without leave, convicted this month of desertion.

Charlie Company was the tough-luck kids of the battalion, exiled to a remote scrap yard, daily targets of a guerrilla network that made bombs from cellphones and toy cars.

They were part-timers, civilians at heart, men unfettered by military decorum, led by a tough Miami cop trained on the streets of Little Havana. To those who opposed them, justice came swiftly.

"You wouldn't touch these guys," said Edouard Gluck, a battalion photographer. "If you weren't going to come peacably, then to hell with you. You were going to come with a hole in you, or in a bag."

The First Battalion entered Iraq with 550 soldiers. Fifty-four men received injuries that merited Purple Hearts, given to those wounded in direct contact with the enemy and hurt badly enough to require medical treatment. It was one of a few infantry battalions that returned from Iraq without a single combat death.

"We called ourselves the luckiest battalion ever," said Col. Hector Mirabile, battalion commander. "And we knew it."

Nearly half of the decorations went to Charlie Company.

Sgt. Jason Recio came home with a mangled foot. Sgt. Jose Mateo came home with bad hearing and post-traumatic stress. Sgt. John Quincy Adams came home with a quarter-size fragment of shrapnel in his skull.

Charlie Company was activated on Jan. 16, 2003, part of the largest National Guard mobilization since World War II.

At Fort Stewart, through the end of February, Charlie Company trained. Twenty-eight days of how to set up a traffic-control point, how to defend a military installation or a dam, how to match a laser to a weapon.

Then to Baghdad Airport, and to Ramadi.

## MISSION IN RAMADA

Ramadi has more citizens than Miami, 425,000, packed into a smaller geographical area. The population swells to 700,000 on weekdays, when desert dwellers walk and drive into the city to work.

The guardsmen found it a hot, dusty, smelly city of open sewer lines and strewn garbage, a place where fruit merchants and bomb-makers were often one and the same.

"If hell physically exists, if there is in fact a hell . . . it is Ramadi," Gluck said. "It's the worst place I've ever been to on the face of the earth, and I've been to a lot of places."

Alpha, Bravo and Charlie companies all drew essentially the same assignment in different parts of Ramadi: Keep the peace, search vehicles and houses, confiscate weapons, get the infrastructure working, hire and train police.

More than four miles from the nearest help, Charlie Company patrolled Ramadi's eastern frontier, a rural area occupied by criminal tribes.

"We were on our own," said Spc. Esteban Lora, a Miami Dade College student in peacetime.

## COMBAT OUTPOST

Charlie Company took up residence in a maintenance yard. The decaying fortification became known as the Combat Outpost, with city on one side, open farmland on the other.

The guardsmen endured sand fleas and mosquitoes, showered in the open, and dwelled in constant fear of 60mm and 82mm mortar shells. You usually didn't hear them until they landed.

They played Dungeons & Dragons and card games, and used car parts for weights. They slept inside the offices and mechanic bays on cool nights. On hot nights, they slept outdoors. When mortar fire came heavily, they ran indoors and cursed the heat.

Food had to be trucked in. Sometimes the trucks would be hit. One morning, the company's breakfast was blown to bits.

Charlie Company was led by Capt. Tad Warfel, 39, a career guardsman from Tallahassee who was fond of drawling, Ah don't need to be an expert in everything. Ah just need to know someone who is.

Warfel butted heads with Mirabile, the battalion commander whose civilian job is to oversee the budget of the Miami Police Department.

Ever the number-cruncher, Mirabile recalls Ramadi in terms of mission tallies and success rates. His favorite command evokes Jean-Luc Picard, the dour commander from television's Star Trek: "Make it so."

## 'SHOOT FIRST'

"Col. Mirabile's philosophy is shoot first, ask questions later," said Gluck, his driver in Ramadi. "He is a policeman, and he did a very effective job policing Ramadi."

There were other military units in Ramadi, but when military intelligence identified a high-value target, the guardsmen were chosen to make the capture.

"If you crossed paths with the 124th Infantry, you would be killed. End of discussion," Gluck said.

Soldiers traveled in squads: seven to 10 men, with enough firepower to get everyone out safely. Patrols were assigned sectors of up to 20 square blocks. They patrolled on foot.

The battalion executed nearly 150 raids to capture enemies identified by intelligence. And Mirabile led four full-size operations, searching for Saddam Hussein loyalists in areas of 100 or more homes. The battalion's success rate on such missions, Mirabile said, was "90 percent."

Mythology quickly took shape around the First Battalion and Charlie Company and their uncanny fortunes.

On June 14, a bullet penetrated the protective vest of Charlie Company Spc. James Bissett as he sat in the rear of a vehicle. It hit his cross and his dog tag and went no farther. The impact cracked Bissett's sternum. He was the first in Charlie Company to earn a Purple Heart.

The sense of invincibility wouldn't last.

Roadside checkpoints allowed the soldiers to capture the illegal weapons and explosives moving around the city. But checkpoints were also targets, and the longer the soldiers remained, the more vulnerable they became.

The night of June 15, someone ran a roadblock. Soldiers yelled for the driver to stop. He didn't. Gunfire broke out.

Spc. Jose Cardenas felt a jerk on his leg. He stumbled to the sidewalk and lay down. A sergeant took his weapon and handed it to another soldier, who was out of ammunition.

"Beside me, there was this young man and his father or uncle, and they were both hit and they were bleeding," Cardenas said. "I felt helpless because I couldn't do anything."

#### AMBUSH ALLEY

Complicated intersections put soldiers at risk. They kept getting hit at one such place, called the Y because of its shape. At the start of July, Charlie Company set up nightly checkpoints at the Y.

On the fourth night, July 5, five guardsmen rolled up to the checkpoint along a stretch known as Ambush Alley. Seconds later came the explosion - a rocket-propelled grenade, or a roadside bomb, possibly both.

Spc. Ramiro Mayorga lost several fingers. Sgt. Jason Recio lost a leg below the knee. The bomb tore part of Lt. Ben Barr's bicep, and shrapnel lodged in his neck. Sgt. Jose Mateo took shrapnel to the left knee, left arm and head and lost hearing in both ears.

"Recio was screaming, 'My leg, my leg, oh God, my leg,' " recalled Lora, who stands to receive a Bronze Star for saving Recio's life.

Lora turned to the driver and said, "Sir, we need to get the hell out of here."

Barr, the driver, hit the gas. The battered Humvee still drove. "It was one of those miracle things," Lora said.

The engagement changed the way Charlie Company looked at the war.

"But that was the first time we had very major injuries," Lora said. "The whole 'I'm Superman' mentality, 'I'm invincible,' that went away."

The two checkpoints also taught the company a lesson: "Don't stay in the same spot for a long time," said Sgt. Mike Naugle, whose civilian job is with the Palm Beach County property appraiser.

#### ENEMY EXPLOSIVES

Along with rocket-propelled grenades, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were the No. 1 casualty producer in Charlie Company.

A stretch of Highway 10, the road to Baghdad, ran straight through the middle of Ramadi and quickly became known to servicemen as IED Alley. The enemy also liked to plant improvised explosive devices along the River Road, running along the Euphrates River on the north side of town.

All that summer, soldiers played a cat-and-mouse game with the men who built the bombs.

The earliest bombs were detonated with wires, leading from the bomb to a man in the nearest building. Soldiers learned to search those buildings and to catch the detonator. Then the enemy turned to garage-door openers, which could detonate a bomb at 500 yards. Soldiers learned to search within that radius. Then the enemy switched to remote-control car engines, with a range of 800 yards. Soldiers learned to arrest anyone holding a remote for a toy car. Then the enemy switched to cellular phones. The only limit was a line of sight.

And so on.

"We had an 80 percent [success] rate in finding the IEDs prior to detonation," Mirabile said. "Four out of five. It was that one that kept hurting."

Staff Sgt. John Quincy Adams and Spc. William Riddle were ambushed with an IED during a morning patrol Aug. 29. The explosion left a fragment in Adams' head and 10 more in his right arm.

Adams speaks with slurred speech now and is partly paralyzed on the right side.

Soldiers caught the bomber.

Even though it was dangerous, even though his company was exchanging a lot of bullets with the enemy, Warfel kept his company patrolling. If men got hit, he would bump it up from two patrols a day to four.

"I just made sure I kept the company busy . . . so they didn't begin to question what they were doing or why they were doing it," Warfel said. "Over there, there was no room for second-guessing."

The relentless patrols served another purpose. Let up for a day or a week, and the enemy would have that much more time to move contraband and lay traps. They would gain the initiative.

"Our presence disrupted them," Naugle said. "It kept them always guessing when we were going to show up."

#### FINAL CASUALTY

The last man from Charlie Company to be wounded in battle, on Feb. 19, was its captain. Tad Warfel was searching a hospital with his men when someone hurled a grenade from an upper floor. The blast caught him in the right arm.

Charlie Company flew home in March. The unit was down from 126 men to 95, minus many men with injuries and one, Mejia, absent without leave.

John Quincy Adams, with shrapnel in his head, is learning to speak again. Mario Vega, wounded in a bomb blast, suffers sweating nightmares and sometimes wakes up screaming. Jose Mateo, a former auto technician with shrapnel up and down his left side and bulging discs in his neck, is battling depression and post-traumatic stress.

"It's OK," Mateo said. "I'm alive, you know? We're all alive."

#### CHARLIE COMPANY IN RAMADI: A TIMELINE

Purple Heart recipients' names are in bold>.

JAN. 16, 2003

Activation.

JAN. 19 TO MARCH 5

Mobilization training, Fort Stewart, Ga.

MARCH 6

Arrival in Jordan.

APRIL 28

Arrival at Baghdad Airport.

MAY 23

Arrival in Ramadi.

JUNE 14

A bullet bounces off the cross and dog tag of Spc. James Bissett, breaking his sternum.

JUNE 15

Spc. Jose Cardenas is shot in the leg at a traffic control point. Also injured: Sgt. Steve Ryest.

JULY 6

A rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and/or improvised explosive device (IED) detonates beneath a Humvee. Injured: Sgt. Jose Mateo, Sgt. Jason Recio, Lt. Ben Barr, Spc. Ramiro Mayorga. Spc. Esteban Lora is nominated for a Bronze Star for valor for saving Recio's life, treating the injured and single-handedly maintaining radio contact.

AUG. 27

Sgt. Mario Vega is wounded by an IED exploding beneath his 2.5-ton truck. Also, Sgt. James Coe and Spc. Charles Memmott are wounded by an IED near their vehicle.

AUG. 29

Ambush during mounted patrol. Injured by IED: Sgt. John Quincy Adams and Spc. William Riddle.

OCT. 3

Spc. John Thomas, Spc. James Kiefer are wounded by IEDs and RPGs in an ambush while patrolling on Highway 10. Kiefer, who faces enemy fire twice to retrieve a lost radio and a damaged vehicle to help his squad escape, is nominated for a Bronze Star for valor.

NOV. 1

Sgt. 1st Class Walter Demarest is wounded by an IED.

NOV. 4

Sgt. Joel Cepeda is wounded while in the gunner's turret on a Humvee when an IED explodes.

NOV. 18

Pfc. Jose Armendariz and Spc. Julian Hernandez are wounded in a mortar attack on the outpost.

NOV. 26

Spc. Esteban Lora and Spc. Henry Tobar are wounded at a traffic control point when an RPG hits their vehicle.

JAN. 16, 2004

Spc. Dewey Holloway, at main batallion base camp when it is mortared, suffers perforated eardrum and concussion.

JAN. 31

Lt. Robert Keith Greene suffers a perforated eardrum from an IED hidden inside a motorcycle.

FEB. 19

Capt. Tad Warfel is wounded in the arm by a grenade hurled from an upper floor of a building.

FEB. 28

Return to Fort Stewart.

MARCH 6

Return to armory in North Miami.