

## U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

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### SERVICE REMEMBERS, HONORS NINE SOLDIERS KILLED IN BATTLE IN AFGHANISTAN

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**VICENZA, Italy** -- Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team and members of the Vicenza military community gathered July 18 to remember and honor nine of their comrades who died in battle earlier this month.



BARBARA ROMANO

Soldiers, families, friends, colleagues and members of the Vicenza, Italy community attend a memorial service at the Caserma Ederle chapel there July 18 in honor of nine Soldiers from Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry killed in combat in Afghanistan July 13.

Nine Soldiers from the 2nd platoon of the brigade's Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), were manning an outpost with 25 Afghan Soldiers when they died in combat during a insurgent attack in Wanat, Afghanistan, July 13.

A crowd of more than 400, including U.S. and Italian Soldiers, Family members, colleagues, friends and members of the Vicenza community, filled the installation chapel and more than 500 listened and watched the service via closed-circuit video in the Caserma Ederle theater, according to estimates from the chapel staff. The service was also broadcast to Southern European Task Force (Airborne) Soldiers participating in exercise Immediate Response 2008 in the Republic of Georgia.

Soldiers speaking at the memorial ceremony commemorated their comrades' courage, love of life and spirit.

Spc. Sergio Abad “always went out of his way to be the best at whatever he did. Whether it was a mortar system or any other thing he enjoyed doing,” said team leader Spc. Christopher Gross.

“He was the guy at formation every morning that would be wide awake and ready to go, no matter what.”

Abad, 21, who enlisted in the Army in January 2006 and reported to the 173rd in August 2006, never brought a bad attitude to work and always strove to complete any mission he was assigned, Gross said.

“He had to be the fastest, the most fit and would outdo us all, but he would always put helping others before himself,” Gross said. “He was one of a kind. He was always there when you needed him, regardless of the circumstances.”

Spc. Richard Ingedue described team member Cpl. Matthew Phillips as a world traveler who was always pulling out maps to talk about his travels.

Ingedue also remembered a time when Phillips put on a wedding dress in anticipation and celebration of his upcoming marriage. It was one of Phillips’ many off-the-wall ensembles, the corporal said.

“At first I thought he was crazy,” Ingedue said. “But after going with him, I saw how much fun everyone had, and realized that is why he did it.”

Phillips, 27, enlisted in November 2005 and reported to the 173rd in May 2006. Ingedue said he was a dedicated husband, friend and Soldier.

Cpl. Jonathan Ayers was one of the older Soldiers on the team, Ingedue remembered.

“So I had someone I could relate to and share constant insults with,” he said. “He also had an uncanny ability to avoid details.”

Ayers, 24, a former truck driver before enlisting in April 2006 and reporting to the 173rd in September, was always good-natured and was seldom upset, Ingedue added.

“He did his job quietly and efficiently every day and you could always count on him in any situation,” he said.

The team used to kid Cpl. Jason Bogar about his prior service in the Army National Guard and his lack of airborne wings, Ingedue said.

“Jason took all of that in stride and was soon brought into the family and was treated as one of our own,” he said.

Bogar, 25, was constantly collecting video footage, wearing a helmet-mounted camera at times, and producing movies, Ingedue recalled.

Before reporting to the 173rd in November 2007, Bogar had made two earlier combat deployments, Ingedue said.



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Flowers and cards adorn a display at a memorial service for nine Soldiers from Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne) killed in combat in Afghanistan July 13. A crowd of approximately 900 took part in the July 18 service at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, Italy.

“Jason was notoriously ‘squared away.’ He made me a better team leader, constantly making me look good without taking any of the personal credit,” Ingedue said.

“Jason, you got your wings now and when we remember you, it will be as a Chosen Company paratrooper,” he added.

Ingedue said his former barracks roommate, Cpl. Gunnar Zwilling, was the youngest Soldier in the company and was somewhat difficult to live with, but over time, became a friend and “the little brother I never had.”

“He had the gift of laughter that was extremely contagious -- even when he was not trying to be funny,” he said.

Zwilling, 20, joined the Army in February 2006 and reported to the brigade in July 2006.

“Gunnar was an outstanding Soldier who showed maturity beyond his years, Ingedue said. “He was fearless when we came in contact (with the enemy). I drew my strength from his.”

“Cpl. Pruitt Rainey was an awesome guy and one of my best friends,” said Spc. Ian Eads, remembering his former team leader. “Everyone could count on him to get things done. He knew when it was time to be a friend and when it was time to be a leader.”

Rainey, 22, one of the largest and strongest men in Chosen Company, constantly working out and frequently challenged his comrades to wrestling matches they would never win, Eads said. The corporal was equally unbeatable in poker and enjoyed playing practical jokes.

Rainey enlisted in August 2005 and reported to the 173rd in February 2006.

“He was a great guy with a huge heart,” Eads said. “He was a great Soldier, leader and awesome friend.”

Chosen Company’s 2nd platoon was always close, Eads said when he recalled Cpl. Jason Hovater, 24.

“Jason and I were in the same squad together, and we were friends. We had our ups and downs as all friends do,” he continued. But at the end of the day Jason would do anything for me, as I would do for him.”

The pair pulled long guard shifts together, and Hovater would talk about his family, Eads said.

Hovater, who joined the Army in February 2006 and reported to the 173rd in July 2006, was a “PT (physical training) stud -- a machine that would never get tired” -- and entertained the unit with his impressions.

“He was one of my closest friends, one of the nicest people, and the best Soldier I have ever met,” Eads said. “He was always the first to volunteer for everything and always put everyone else before himself. He would do anything for his brothers.”

Staff Sgt. John Otfinoski, 2nd platoon squad leader, called Sgt. Israel Garcia, 24, a solid team leader who took the time to lead and train his men, to the point of helping them gain basic skills such as reading and speaking English.

“Sgt. Garcia was not only a leader of his men, he was a leader among his peers,” Otfinoski said. “Time and time again other squad leaders would come to him asking for advice on everything from training to marriage advice.”

When Garcia found a way to do something better, he would ensure everyone learned the new method, he said.

Garcia enlisted in October 2002. His first assignment was with Company B, 1st Battalion, 504th Infantry Regiment, Fort Bragg, N.C. He joined the 173rd in July 2006.

“Sgt. Garcia would challenge his men to do better every day and in that process, he challenged me,” Otfinoski said. “He was a leader until the end and then some.”

1st Lt. Jonathan Brostrom was proud to be a Hawaiian and liked to surf, said Otfinoski.

“He was a different kind of leader,” he said.

Brostrom was concise and to the point when leading his men, Otfinoski said. He never wasted their time with long meetings.

“He never used 10 words when it could be said with five,” he said.

“Lt. Brostrom never liked to go anywhere without his men,” the staff sergeant added. He would join his men on weapons drills and helping out with maintenance.

“He said, ‘Without you guys, I would not have anything to do’,” Otfinoski recalled the lieutenant saying. “No matter what the task, sir, you were always there.”

Brostrom was commissioned a second lieutenant in 2006 after completing the Reserve Officers Training Corps program at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, in June 2006. He completed the airborne, air assault, U.S. Navy scuba diving, combatives, Infantry Officers Basic, Basic Officer Leaders and Ranger Courses before reporting to the 173rd in June 2007.

“Sir, you were a big part of the platoon,” he said. “Your leadership and personality blended in so well, and in the end, you were 2nd platoon. I’ll see you on the beach.”

“One cannot look at a scene of this magnitude and not grasp the great cost of freedom,” Lt. Col. Todd Johnston, the 173rd’s rear commanding officer, told the assembly.

The nine Soldiers honored during the service and the 12 other 2nd platoon Soldiers receiving treatment at the Landstuhl (Germany) Regional Medical Center are the most battle-tested paratroopers in the brigade, he said. They were well trained, prepared for battle, followed all standard operating procedures and were “courageously led by 1st Lt. Jonathan Brostrom,” he said.

“No positions were overrun, the wire was not breached, and only uncommon valor of the men you see here prevented greater loss,” he said.

When they deployed to Afghanistan 15 months ago, the Soldiers believed in their mission and goals, the colonel added.

“The valor and sacrifice of these nine confirmed that conviction has not abated some 14 months later,” he said. “We will honor their lives by remaining committed, as they did, to an ultimate victory.”



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