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## Troops salute fallen leader

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BAGHDAD -- First Sgt. Tito Ferrera stood up straight yesterday, looked out over his troops and started the roll call. He called out three names, and each answered: "Here, 1st sergeant."

Then he called out the name of Staff Sgt. Darrell R. Griffin. Silence.

He tried twice more. Still no answer.

And then, as the soldiers of the battlehardened Stryker Brigade stood in tears, soldiers fired a memorial salute for the once larger-than-life squad leader, killed by a bullet on the streets of western Baghdad just eight days after his 36th birthday.

"He's one of those people you would never expect that to happen to," said Staff Sgt. Anthony Mersino five days earlier, as word drifted through the gray-covered tents of the Stryker camp that one of their own had died. This is where the politics stop.

"He was just one of those soldiers, individuals, that everyone will look at -- he is bigger than this war, and one little bullet did it," said Capt. Stephen Phillips, the last person to see Sgt. Griffin alive. He held the wounded man's hand as he was rushed to the helicopter that would take him to a neurosurgeon at Balad Air Base.

Inside the operations center in Camp Stryker, Baghdad, phone calls whipped back and forth, everyone anxiously waiting for any bit of information, any reason to stay hopeful, to not let go. But within hours, anguish crossed the face of the battalion senior medic Sgt. 1st Class Douglas Wallace as he walked quietly over to the battalion operations officer and handed him a yellow slip of paper. "Time of death, sir."

Everyone in the Tactical Operations Center looked shocked. Sgt. Griffin had been a popular leader, a well-read, hard-talking man, who loved his wife, Diana, and his dog Luna.

On March 21, Sgt. Griffin's Stryker unit was returning from an operation in Baghdad's tough Shi'ite area of Sadr City. As they approached the home stretch, there was a burst of gunfire.

"I got a radio report that is forever marked in my mind," Capt. Phillips, 31, recalled yesterday. The platoon leader had told him simply, "I've got a casualty: gunshot wound to the head." Sgt. Griffin, who typically stood in the hatch of the powerful Stryker vehicle, had taken a bullet underneath his helmet. Everyone moved. Sgt. Griffin was rushed to Baghdad's top combat surgical hospital inside the heavily fortified Green Zone.

Capt. Phillips didn't lay eyes on his wounded soldier until 15 minutes later when the Stryker group pulled into the hospital. He climbed out of his vehicle and ran the quarter-mile of dusty road to the emergency room just as they were moving Sgt. Griffin on a stretcher into the operating room. "I saw the wound, and I knew it

was grim," Capt. Phillips said. In the meantime, plans were made to evacuate Sgt. Griffin to Balad. The transfer was done in record time, but the squad leader didn't make it.

Capt. Phillips turned away his head and fought back the tears. He took a long drink of water and looked up. It was only hours before the memorial service, when the roll call would be taken and taps played one last time for his fallen friend.

"This [conversation] is good," he struggled to say. "Because I can't cry in front of the men, because tomorrow we go right back into Sadr City." He paused. "I held his hand, as they moved him to the helicopter. I wrote his wife, in a letter of condolence, that I still felt life in him."

There was not much time left to mourn. The memorial was going to start soon, and Capt. Phillips had to get his men back to their base that same night. "I'll deal with it on my own time, on my own terms," he said. "But right now, there is still work to be done."