

## **What others are saying about *DEATH IN THE TRIANGLE:***

“Wow... what an awesome read! Once I started reading, I was a captive and couldn't put it down as I was so anxious to see what happened next. It is a professionally written story that brought back tons of memories of my time in Vietnam. John nailed it!”

- Joe Fair, author of “Call Sign Dracula: My Tour with the Black Scarves.”

“When reading *Death in the Triangle*, I could see all the faces, the sweaty jungle, hear all the mind-numbing yet terrifying sounds, smell all the wretched odors, and feel the deepest fears. You said it was fiction. It's too real to be that. Too honest to be that. A great sequel to *When Can I Stop Running?*”

- R Scott Ormond, author of “Shadow Soldier: Kilo Eleven.”

"Once the soldiers set out on their patrol, the action is nonstop. Podlaski puts the reader right in the thick of the danger and action in this short story! It truly gives an outsider a better understanding of what the Vietnam War was like.”

- Yvette M Calleiro, author of “The Chronicles of the Diasodz.”

“In *Death in the Triangle*” John Podlaski weaves another excellent tale of a small infantry unit, fighting in the lethal caldron of Vietnam’s Iron Triangle. Follow Polack, Sixpack, Doc and other members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon as they execute their difficult missions. Highly recommended!”

- Joe Campolo Jr, author of “The Kansas NCO trilogy” and “On War, Fishing & Philosophy.”

*Death in the Triangle* reveals a richly detailed universe in exquisite detail, just as I remember it, with its sights, sounds, and smells. This story begins right where “*When Can I Stop Running*” left off. The author is a great story teller and readers will bear witness to the physical and mental hardships these young men overcame to complete the mission. Highly recommended.

- Christopher Gaynor, author of “A Soldier Boy Hears the Distant Guns”. His work also includes a feature story and photos in “Time Magazine.”

“In *Death In The Triangle*, John Podlaski’s third intriguing tome about the Vietnam War, John pulls you into the real experience of combat soldiers with his seat of the pants, painstakingly frank, truthful account of what real combat was like for our warriors. John, a decorated veteran of that war, tells the story of the daily trials and tribulations of a group of veterans, as only a person who has ‘done that/been there’ could.

John's down to earth, regular guy portrayal of those experiences, reflected and influenced in his writing by his personal memories, takes us to Vietnam and the Triangle. You'll cringe, weep, laugh, shudder, and feel this whole story like you were there; not wanting to set it down."

- Jerry Kunnath, outdoor writer Member of the Michigan Outdoor Writers association

**DEATH**  
**IN THE**  
**TRIANGLE**

By

John Podlaski

Digital Edition

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While 'Death in the Triangle' is largely a work of historical fiction, many of the events and anecdotes described in the book are from the actual experiences of the author. The places mentioned were real and did exist. The characters portrayed are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, and locales, are entirely coincidental.

For Jan, Nicole, and Scarlett

God Bless America's Soldiers – Past, Present, and  
Future

**Author's note:** There were many military acronyms and slang terms used by soldiers during the Vietnam War which are included in this story. In case you are non-military or have forgotten over time, I've added a glossary of terms at the end of this book for your reference.

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*Maps showing the location of the Iron Triangle*



**The Iron Triangle is within the circled area**





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## Chapter One

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Sixpack (Sgt. Holmes) brushed the flap aside and entered the large green canvas tent that the First Platoon Wolfhounds called “Home” as the First Battalion built its new firebase dubbed Lynch. Inside, a heavy, musty odor permeated the air, most likely caused by the tent sitting in storage since the Korean War. To a newcomer, there was a rancid/cheese-like smell, almost overpowering to the senses; body odor from 30 unbathed soldiers. The men worked hard and sweated profusely since their arrival last week – digging holes, filling sandbags, laying concertina wire, building bunkers, patrolling, and going out on ambushes. Many looked forward to the portable showers scheduled to be erected later this week. In the meantime, everyone smelled the same and therefore nobody noticed the pungent odor.

The six-foot-four, muscular, broad-shouldered staff-sergeant was outfitted in his patrol gear. Battle suspenders draped his shoulders and held two smoke grenades, four concussion grenades, and two first-aid bandage packs hanging from embedded metal clips sewn into the material. The suspenders held up a weighted web belt encircling his waist. Attached were two ammo pouches with four 18-round magazines in each and two canteens of water - one over each hip. An ammo bandolier draped

across his chest – ala Pancho Villa, with seven 20-round clips in individual pouches. Sixpack's pockets on both his blouse and pants bulged outward, stuffed with C-Ration tins, a map, bug spray, a couple of flares, and other necessities he needed for the patrol. Completing the ensemble, a green boony hat covering his sandy colored hair, small tufts of curly yellow hair poking out from the sides; a green cloth towel straddling his shoulders; and an M-16 rifle gripped tightly in his right hand.

As the platoon sergeant moved along the center aisle, his tattered and bleached combat boots plodded through a trough of ankle-deep mud in the center aisle – thanks, in part, to the heavy overnight rain. The suction made it difficult to pull his foot free after each step, sounding like a plunger in a waste-filled toilet, while small whirlpools in the water above the muck marked his path. Sleeping soldiers lay in various poses on wood-framed green canvas cots along both sides of the swamplike aisle, making the noise unavoidable. These cots were quite uncomfortable for most over five-feet tall; the wood poles at both ends cut off circulation and numbed legs during most sleepless nights. Every fully clothed soldier still wore muddy boots with red caked mud resembling pie crust splattered across their trouser legs, almost reaching the knees. Some soldiers were covered with poncho liners against the chill of night. Others, who had been on duty all night, had simply laid on their stomachs on the taut

canvas, using either poncho liners or arms as pillows. Light snoring complimented the outdoor sound of a waking firebase.

The greenish brown canvas side walls of the tent would soon be rolled up in preparation for the upcoming heat of the day. The tied rolls of tarp-like material usually hung suspended just above the top layer of a four-foot high wall of sandbags surrounding each of the five identical tents of the company. A gentle breeze flowed through the length of the bay from one end to the other. Rucksacks, helmets, weapons, extra ammo, boxes of C-Rations, and other personal items were stored against the sandbagged wall next to each cot, designating the personal space of each soldier. First Platoon's tent was the closest to the artillery batteries but farthest from the battalion Tactical Bunker and mess tent which stood near the center of the compound.

Last night, First Platoon's responsibility was to provide security for the firebase. Thirty-two members split duties: a single squad conducting an overnight ambush, two soldiers in a listening post, and the rest manning perimeter bunkers. Uninterrupted sleep was usually rare in the bush or in a firebase since watches took place in shifts. First or last watch provided the best chance of a decent night's sleep, but still not guaranteed when a 50% or 100% alert was required all night long. At daybreak, the war continued with new assignments.

Sleeping in was a memory from home. Soldiers learned quickly to catch some z's whenever the opportunity arose, and many learned to fall asleep standing up.

Their LP reported many enemy soldiers stopping and moving past their location last night. Shortly after, several mortar rounds landed inside the firebase, putting everyone on high alert while the mortar and artillery batteries sought out the enemy mortar crew.

Less than an hour later, Rock's Third Squad blew its ambush and killed nine enemy soldiers, recovering a mortar base plate, 10 mortar rounds, 200 rounds of 7.62mm ammo for AK-47's, bags of rice, tins of fish and chicken, personal effects, cigarettes, official documents, letters and a map. The ecstatic intelligence group couldn't wait to scrutinize the bounty turned in at the TOC earlier that morning.

The final incident occurred a couple hours before sunrise. The LP reported movement to their front, reacting with grenades at the perceived threat of attack. The enemy soldiers turned out to be a family of rock apes, tossing large stones at them in retaliation for trespassing into the animals' domain. Updates of incidents occurring outside of the firebase usually circulated slowly, however, Polack (John Kowalski) and LG's (Louis Gladwell) experience on LP with the rock apes had spread like wildfire. Rock's ambush squad and the LP returned

this morning to a barrage of jokes and teasing, making for a humble day.

Sixpack kicked the boots hanging over the end of the cot; clumps of dried mud dropped off and fell into the swamp causing splashes and rippling in the still water.

“Let’s go, everybody up!” He kicked the next pair of boots and watched pieces of the red pie crust drop and splash. “It’s 0830 hours. If you haven’t eaten, get some chow, grab your shit and meet by the gate in 30 minutes.”

Soldiers stirred and struggled to sit up, their movements slow and zombie-like. Complaints echoed throughout the tent.

“Bullshit, Sixpack. I just laid down.”

“Yeah, none of us got any sleep last night.”

“Quit your bitchin’, man. We took fire during our ambush, lost a couple guys, and then had to pack up and move in pitch black darkness. And on top of that, we had to haul all the gook shit back with us.”

“I heard that!”

“Can it!” Sixpack spat, causing everyone to suddenly stop. “We all suffered last night,” he emphasized, “be at the gate in 30 minutes and don’t be late!” Sixpack moved through the shallow portion of the channeled water brushing through the entranceway and leaving the tent.

The complaining resumed as soldiers gathered equipment and left the tent in small groups.

Polack and LG walked out together and headed to the mess tent for some breakfast. “I hope we don’t hear any more shit about the monkeys last night,” LG offered.

“Me neither, bro. I about shit my pants when that happened though.”

“You and me, both, brother. That was my scariest night since being here.”

LG walked with his head hung low, his boony hat still jammed down on his head with the brim resting on his ears: a gift from Sgt. Rock before going out to the LP yesterday. Prior to leaving the firebase last night, LG spent time working his ‘do’ which in his opinion was perfect, in the shape of a shiny bowling ball. His boony hat sat on top like a clown hat, swaying side-to-side with every step. When Rock reached him in line during the ambush squad’s final equipment check, he pulled down on the brim of his hat so forcefully it captured all his hair and bottomed out on the top of his ears.

Polack glanced at LG’s soggy hat, still on since last night. “Head hurt?”

“No, why?”

“I thought with your boony hat jammed down tight like that it might cause a lot of pressure around your head.”

“Naw, I’m good. In fact, saved me some time this morning and I didn’t have to rake it and get it in shape before leaving.”

“It’s bitchin’!” Polack stated sarcastically. “You should wear it like that all the time, G.”

“You know Polack, you might be onto something there. If I buy a bigger hat, the man will never know how long my hair is. I’d keep growing it and then really fit in with the brothers when I get back to the world.”

Both smiled and hammered their fists together in a mini dap.

LG and Polack hailed from Detroit and lived within four miles of one another. They played basketball at their respective high schools but never played against one another; Polack attended a Catholic school and LG played in the public school league. Named “All State” during his final two years, LG secured a college scholarship, but flunked two of his classes, revoking his free ride. Uncle Sam found him soon afterward.

At six feet tall, 170 pounds, Polack’s normally fair-complected skin was baked to a dark bronze from the hot tropical sun. He sported medium-brown hair, somewhat bleached out now, and a light mustache, the hair slightly longer than regulation. This being his sixth month in-country, he was away from the main base camp and forward fire support bases for almost two months. Out in the jungles,



personal grooming is low on the list of daily priorities. With no one to impress, nobody cares how they look. His shaggy hair was not an issue, at least not here at Firebase Lynch.

Louis stood a couple inches taller than Polack with a slightly lankier build. An African American, with light caramel-colored skin, a long and narrow face with a forehead lightly pitted with old acne scars. LG tried to grow a goatee since arriving in-country but only acquired a dozen or so half-inch long hairs spread across his chin. He checked his hand mirror daily, anxious for any signs of goatee progress, unwilling to give up on the plan. LG just began his fourth month in Vietnam and had been carrying the platoon radio since his arrival.

Both are generally involved whenever a pick-up game of basketball happens in the firebases or rear area during a three-day break from the bush. However, they always seem to be on opposing teams and have never played together.

The two men joined the line at the mess tent and loaded up on weak orange juice, runny scrambled eggs, leathery strips of bacon, and toast burnt on one side. They ate mostly in silence because of the limited time and left five minutes before they were to meet at the main gate.

On their way, LG broke away and headed to the Battalion CP where he joined four other soldiers to

sign out PRC-25 radios and extra batteries for the patrol.

Polack carried his M-60 machine gun on the right shoulder, and with his right hand, held on to one of the extended front legs to keep it balanced. A feedbox with 100 rounds was attached to the side of the pig (slang for the machine gun), and Polack had 300 more wrapped around his waist.

The members of the First Platoon were gathered in a haphazard formation and loitered near the gate; 28 soldiers clumped together with weapons in hand, some wearing fatigue jackets, others, only sleeveless green t-shirts for the patrol. All four squads kept mostly to themselves, each clique engaging in separate group conversations.

Polack was a member of the First Squad. His mates, Frenchie, Wild Bill, Scout, Doc, and BJ were animated in their discussion about the upcoming patrol. All had worked hard during the week at filling sandbags and building fortifications within the new firebase. This was a welcomed change of pace.

When nearing the gate, Billie Joe (BJ), Polack's assistant gunner, left the group of waiting soldiers and hurried out to meet him. Outfitted like the others, he wore suspenders, an ammo belt, grenades, and an M-16 rifle, and humped another 300 machine gun rounds encircling his waist like Polack.

BJ from Alabama tried to be a ‘good ol boy’. The newest member of the squad, he had only been in country six weeks. The men quickly nicknamed him ‘BJ’ and assigned him to Polack as an ammo bearer for the machine gun.

On his first mission, he fell asleep during the last watch out in the bush. The platoon was operating in the Michelin Rubber Plantation where a curfew existed between 1800 hours and 0600 hours. The last man was supposed to wake everyone at 0530 so they could disassemble their mechanical ambushes before the end of the curfew. An explosion woke them all at 0630 and they all worried that innocent civilians walked into the booby trap. When stepping out onto the trail, they found four dead VC soldiers, and others nearby fired at them while running away. The dead gooks saved both BJ and the platoon from dire consequences. Billie Joe was scared straight from that point on and had not fallen asleep on watch ever since.

“Is it true what they’re saying that y’all threw grenades at a bunch of monkeys last night?” he asked sincerely when reaching Polack.

“Really?” Polack looked around and noticed smirks on many of the faces of those soldiers standing about. “We thought they were gooks!” he responded, loud enough for those nearby to hear.

“Hiding up in the trees?” somebody from the Fourth Squad asked.

“We didn’t know they were in the trees.”

About that time, LG joined them and did a shortened version of the ‘dap’ with BJ. As the greeting took place, small pebbles and stones landed at their feet.

“What the fuck?” LG said when a small rock hit his boot. He scanned the faces of his fellow soldiers from the platoon, but nobody smirked or looked guilty of anything, and none dared to meet his gaze in fear of laughing out loud.

Those in the First Squad watched intently as their ‘Brothers’ got a good-natured ribbing from the rest of the platoon.

Scout was most concerned as he considered Polack a blood-brother and watched out for him from day one. A full-blooded Cherokee Indian, Scout bonded with Polack during his first night in the bush. When Scout woke Polack for his watch, the Cherry thought he was blind and could not see in the pitch-black darkness of the jungle. Scout led him to the guard position, staying with him for a part of his watch until Polack regained his night vision and was more comfortable. Since then, Scout was instrumental in helping Polack learn the ropes.

The Indian had high cheekbones and a pointed nose which accentuated his tanned and slender face, jet black hair hung over his forehead and ears. He

wore an authentic Indian ancestral headband which complimented the beads he wore around his neck. Scout carried pictures in his wallet showing him in full Native regalia back home in South Carolina. Except for the long flowing black hair, anyone could recognize him in the photo. Scout and Frenchie alternated walking point for the squad.

Wild Bill saw that Polack was in a defensive posture and prepared to intercede if this discussion got out of hand. After all, 28 armed men participating in a heated discussion could become deadly.

Wild Bill was a cowboy from El Paso, TX. He carried a photo in his wallet showing him dressed in a bronco buster outfit standing next to a tall trophy for winning one of his many rodeo competitions. Even with his long hair and beard, the face was unmistakably his. Wild Bill's real name was Bill Hickock.

Frenchie was a seasoned vet and leader of the First Squad. He carried the M79 grenade launcher and always kept a beehive round - a special shell that fired pellets like a shotgun – chambered in his weapon. Each round resembled an oversized bullet, one and a half inches in diameter and three inches long. Frenchie's special vest held a combination of beehive rounds, high explosive rounds (like grenades), and white phosphorus rounds, 30 in total. He always wore a black beret, a good-luck charm that an uncle sent him from France. Hence, the

nickname. Frenchie remained in the background and just did his job.

Doc, an African - American from Philadelphia, was the medic for the platoon. His goal was to study medicine after his tour ended in January. He was extremely skilled at his trade and liked by all. Doc was also the philosopher in the platoon and often shared words of wisdom with the group.

Once, he talked about friendship and camaraderie, stating that squad members, unknowingly, develop a special bond with one another. It was based upon trust and the dependency on each other for moral support and strength. Troops may not see one another after Vietnam, but they would all remember that special bond forever.

Frenchie, Wild Bill and Scout all arrived at the same time and planned to go home in February.

Just then, Sixpack arrived which put an end to the altercation. "Okay, gather around." He waved them in and waited until the 28 members of the platoon surrounded him, like a huddle during a football game. When they were in place, he began the briefing, "As you all know, Polack and LG were almost discovered on LP last night by 20 or more gooks who took a break almost on top of them, and later, might be the same ones responsible for the mortars we received at the firebase. Rock directed an artillery strike on their location and then later blew an ambush which killed nine enemy soldiers."

Rock's squad members received pats on the back and high-fives from fellow soldiers upon hearing the news.

Sixpack continued, "They gathered all the enemy equipment and had to vacate their position and move closer to the firebase. Battalion wants us to first search through the area where the artillery silenced the mortars and then move to where Rock sprung his ambush for a look around. If all goes well, we should be back by early afternoon."

"What about the monkeys?" someone asked, resulting in snickers and guffaws from the rest of the group.

Polack and LG lowered their heads and shook them side to side. "Enough already!" Polack warned angrily.

Sixpack looked to Polack, a serious look upon his face, "Go ahead and tell them what happened, Polack. Then that's the end of it! Understood?" He received acknowledgments from everybody in the huddle when he faced them individually.

Polack cleared his throat, "As Sixpack said, we had about 20 NVA soldiers stop and take a break on the trail right next to our LP. When a couple of them left the column to piss and shit near us, we thought they'd find our claymores and follow the wires back to where we were hiding." The huddle tightened and individuals were more attentive. "It wasn't long after they left that the mortars started falling on the

firebase. We could hear them firing and saw the flashes through the jungle. The CP radio operator also warned us to be on the lookout for a spotter who might be directing the mortar crew as all the rounds landed in key locations within the perimeter. So, LG and I were spooked that somebody was wondering around between us and the firebase. When the artillery fired, we could see those flashes and the fires that started afterwards. Later when Rock sprung his ambush, we had rounds zip by overhead. Luckily, we were huddled in a slight depression or we'd a been toast." LG nodded and grunted in affirmation periodically as if he were responding to a preacher during a church service. "Now after all that, we both heard twigs snapping and brush moving to our front and were about to fire our claymore, when something came flying through the jungle and landed next to us with a thud. The first thing that came to mind was that it was the spotter who tossed a grenade after seeing us. As we jumped out of our hide, I managed to launch a grenade toward the rustling bushes. Mine went off, but the incoming grenade was a dud. Then a few minutes later, it happened a second time, but this time, it was thrown to the opposite side. We both threw a grenade to our front and jumped in the opposite direction. It, too, was a dud. Finally, after the third dud landed, we got back into the hide and blew one of the Claymores. That's when we heard the screeching coming from the jungle. It just so happened that the Colonel was on the horn with us



for a sit-rep, and between him and Rock, both determined that our gooks were instead rock apes.” Polack scanned the surrounding faces. Nobody was smiling. “So, there you have it. Would you have done anything different?”

Scout and Wild Bill were the first to comment. “You did the right thing, Polack.”

“That’s some heavy shit!”

“I’m hip.”

“That’s not the way we heard it this morning. But don’t sweat it!”

“First I heard of something like that happening,” Frenchie said.

“Did you check out the duds?” Rock asked.

“Naw, it was too dark,” LG answered.

“We have to pass the hide on the way out. Maybe we can stop a minute and check it out,” Polack suggested.

“Might can do,” Sixpack remarked.

Most of the soldiers were curious themselves and wanted to see exactly what was thrown at their two platoon brothers. Conversations ceased and no one made anymore comments. “Okay guys, you got it right from the horse’s mouth. So that’s the end of it,” Sixpack emphasized. “Line it up for an equipment check!”

The group circled around and slapped palms with LG and Polack before moving into a formation for the final inspection before leaving the firebase.

Sixpack walked along the first row of the four-row formation and checked to ensure that everyone carried what they needed. They were all decked out the same except for a few; the grenadiers, radio operators and machine gunners all carried extra weight due to their special equipment. Doc carried his med-bag, the strap draped across a shoulder and supporting the 25 pounds of medical supplies. When he got to LG, he paused for a moment. “What’s with the boony hat, LG?”

“Don’t ask, sarge.”

Shaking his head, Sixpack walked away and continued his assessment of the remaining three squads.

Except for Rock’s ambush squad the night before, other members of the First Platoon had not gone beyond the wire, having spent the week working to build the firebase during the day. Blisters broke and callouses already formed. During that same week, they were also tagged for perimeter bunker guard twice.

Grunts get antsy about staying in the same place and doing the same thing day in and day out. Longing for the bush, they were excited and gung-ho to go out on this patrol.

“Lock and load!”

The soldiers pulled back charging handles on the weapons and released them. The spring activated cylinder loaded a single round from the magazine and drove it into the firing chamber with a loud metallic clang. All weapons were now hot.

“Move out!” Sixpack ordered.

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## Chapter Two

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**F**irebase Lynch stood on a patch of land southeast of the city of Tay Ninh and within the footprint of an area identified as the Iron Triangle. Three lines drawn on a map outlined the 125 square miles of thick forests and rubber trees. The three points of the triangle connected the towns of Ben Cat, Ben Suc, and Phu Hoa. The Boi Loi and Hobo Woods bordered the Triangle along one side and the Fil Hol and Michelin Rubber Plantations on the other. The Iron Triangle was known to be an enemy stronghold, filled with miles of tunnels, underground hospitals, training centers, base camps and rest points dating back to before World War II; a troubled area for many years.

In the early part of the war, American and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces destroyed most of the villages in the Triangle and relocated those families to new facilities in a different area of the country. Much of the Triangle then became a “free fire zone”, meaning curfews did not apply, and anyone out and about was considered the enemy. Soldiers were expected to shoot first without requiring clearance. Those remaining villages on the outskirts of the Triangle were extremely supportive of both the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops, making the fight to drive out the enemy almost

impossible. The Triangle was always a major gateway between the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia, and Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam.

However, a large portion of the jungle within the Triangle provided concealment for hundreds of active infiltration routes. The U.S. Army deemed it necessary to build a firebase right in the middle of Indian country and inserted the First Battalion 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Wolfhounds) of the 25th Infantry Division into this quagmire to stop the flow of fresh enemy troops and supplies.

Rock and his squad led the platoon through the gate, leaving the relative safety of the firebase behind. Once outside, the platoon split in half and morphed into two columns approximately 30 feet apart. Rock and his men continued along on the right and were followed by Fourth Squad. Frenchie assumed point for the First Squad on the left, and Third Squad followed, bringing up the rear of that column.

The engineers used Rome Plows to push back the jungle 200 meters beyond the wire, providing those bunker guards on the perimeter an unobstructed view and open fields of fire in the event of enemy ground attacks. However, last night's rain created puddles and made the clay slick as ice. The ground was uneven and covered with large, deep tracks from the heavy equipment. Exposed tree roots, pieces of tree bark, branches and

bowling ball-sized chunks of clay added to the obstacle course. Soldiers performed rare ballet steps as they tiptoed, teetered and pirouetted across the bulldozed landscape. During this portion of the trek, a few soldiers lost their balance and slid through the red mud; two fell and were immediately covered in slime. Those behind helped them up and then continued as if nothing happened. Miraculously, nobody twisted an ankle or got hurt during the short hump through the wasteland.

Once they entered the lush jungle, the footing became stable, but the ground damp and spongy, felt like walking on a trampoline. The light disappeared in the triple canopy, looking more like dusk instead of late morning.

The damp ground and musty smell made Polack uncomfortable. When he looked back into the clearing, the bright sunlight affected his eyes as it did when exiting a dark movie theater in the middle of the day.

Neither column followed the earlier path into the jungle in fear of booby traps and ambushes. Instead, each cut its way through the thick jungle. 'Wait-a-minute vines' were plentiful, (vines with long thorns that snagged packs and shirts causing one to abruptly stop and back up to disengage) but without full packs on their backs, the soldiers easily maneuvered through them.

After hacking through the vegetation for 30 minutes, Rock stopped the column and called for Sixpack to come forward. “Check out this fresh trail,” he said, pointing to the right where a pathway cut through the jungle and ended at the main hardpacked trail between the two columns about 20 feet away. It looked like a tunnel in the jungle, clear enough for a file of soldiers to walk through.

Sgt. Holmes and LG followed it and exited onto the hard-packed trail that both the ambush team and enemy soldiers followed yesterday.

“That must be the path cut by the gooks we heard last night,” LG volunteered. “Yeah, and here’s where they stopped for their break.” He lifted a fish tin into the air from the end of a stick.

Sixpack sniffed at the empty container. “Smells like sardines.”

Just then, a slight rustle sounded in the jungle to their right as Sgt. Rock, his RTO (Radio Telephone Operator), and the rest of his squad exited from the new trail. “This wasn’t here yesterday,” he commented.

“Yeah, LG says that’s where the gooks came from last night and chowed down right where you’re standing.”

A few of the soldiers scoured the area to see if the enemy dropped anything of value during their break.

Polack stood watch on the hard-packed trail, his machine gun held at hip level, and pointed north up the trail. BJ and the rest of the column lined up on Polack and dropped in place to provide security along the northern portion of their small perimeter. He soon noticed that this was near the spot where he and LG hid in the underbrush on LP. The depression, a mere 20 feet above the trail, was still filled with water and surrounded by thick brush.

“Hey, Polack,” Sixpack beckoned.

He turned around.

“Come here,” Sixpack motioned with his head pantomiming for him to join them when their eyes met.

Polack exchanged weapons with BJ, trading the M-60 for his M-16 and walked the 30 feet to where the two sergeants stood.

“This where your Claymore detonated, Polack?” Rock asked pointing to the east side of the trail.

A small crater touched the edge of the four-foot wide hard packed trail, the foliage on the other side literally blown bare for about 20 feet. Beyond, quarter-sized holes perforated the hanging banana leaves and pockmarked the thicker trees from the many small projectiles that blew outward when the mine was triggered.

“Yeah, that’s it.”



Rock and his RTO then left the small group and continued up the northern trail, passing through the temporary perimeter to look for signs of the enemy.

Sixpack walked into the kill zone and dragged his foot through the black dirt where he saw three other depressions that looked like tiny foxholes. “Your grenades must have landed here,” he stated matter of factly. LG and Polack glanced over the area and just nodded their heads in response.

Sixpack turned to the soldiers, “Why don’t you both take a look around for those dud grenades.”

“Will do.” Polack pulled LG by the arm in passing and led him toward their former hide.

Meanwhile Sixpack left the area and joined Rock on the northern trail, where they followed it for about 30 meters.

“Odd that such a well-used trail runs across the entire eastern portion of the firebase?”

“And less than a half a click away from the perimeter.”

“Yeah, but this trail’s been here long before we arrived.” Sixpack used his towel to wipe the sweat from his face and neck.

“Got to lead somewhere.”

“I agree with you there, Rock, but that’s a patrol for another day.”

When the threesome returned to the junction in the trail, LG and Polack joined them a moment later. “No sign of grenades, but we found these rocks,” both held large-sized stones in their hands. “These stood out like a sore thumb on the ground with nothing else coming close.” Four rocks in the shape of large Idaho potatoes weighed over a pound each.

Rock took one and hefted it in his hand. “These bad boys would have knocked your ass silly if they hit either of you on your head.”

“Would have caused some major pain if they hit you anywhere else,” Bert, Rock’s RTO, added while eyeing the prehistoric weapons.

“Heavy little buggers, too,” Sixpack said. “I could see how they’d sound like a grenade if landing nearby in the pitch black of night.”

Polack and LG both smiled.

Some of the nearby soldiers scanned the treetops hoping to spot the family of rock apes that attacked the LP, probably more concerned about falling rocks than the monkeys.

The other soldiers returned empty handed from their search of the enemy break area.

“Okay, line ‘em up, we move out in two minutes.”

Sgt. Rock and his RTO returned with their squad through the same tunnel they exited earlier. Everyone else left their perimeter positions and

joined back up in a column formation, 20 feet to the side of the eastbound trail.

The two columns started moving again through the dense vegetation, wary not only of enemy soldiers, but now of apes tossing rocks from above.

When they arrived at Rock's ambush location, there was no question that a firefight took place here; brass casings from weapons of both sides littered the trail, glistening in the small open area like dropped gems on this narrow, bloody path. The dead enemy soldiers were gone!

Just like at the LP, the foliage across the trail was flattened and blown apart by the exploding Claymore mines. But here, the surrounding foliage was covered in blood splatter, pieces of flesh and clothing. Deep red stains where the bodies had bled out saturated the ground.

“Get security out,” Sixpack ordered.

Frenchie directed his squad members to their positions. Polack and BJ set up farther east beyond the ambush site and positioned the M-60 to cover the trail that continued eastward. Wild Bill, Scout, Nung, and Doc settled in next and covered the rest of that quadrant until they faced due north. Frenchie positioned himself 10 feet beyond Doc, aiming his M-79 Grenade Launcher toward the jungle beyond the Claymore blast area.

Third Squad set up and covered the quadrant from Frenchie to the west, facing the way they

came, while Second and Fourth Squads mirrored the defenses on the southern portion of the perimeter beyond the ambush site.

LG shadowed Sixpack with the radio as Rock explained the previous night's events.

"Our squad was positioned behind that dropped tree beyond the trail," Rock pointed to the south side of the trail.

"A great spot for an ambush," Sixpack agreed.

"We set out mechanicals on both ends of the trail, expecting the gooks that Polack informed us about, to come from their direction up the trail. Then, as a safety, we put another about 50 feet into the jungle to our front expecting them to exit that way after being caught in the ambush."

Sixpack, LG, Rock and Bert spread out and walked through the kill zone for several minutes before returning to the center of their perimeter.

"There's drag marks and blood trails leading away along the east trail," Rock said.

"Yeah, we saw blood splotches on the foliage leading through the jungle and heading in the same direction," Sixpack added.

"Interesting. I wonder if there are some shallow graves nearby. We know for certain there were no survivors."

“How many bodies did you say you counted, Rock?”

“There were at least nine as that’s how many weapons we recovered. There were mostly intact bodies, but some body parts were scattered about, too.”

“Where did the bodies go?” Bert asked.

Sixpack looked at the short, disheveled RTO with red hair and freckles. “Most Vietnamese are Buddhists and believe that if their body is not buried then the soul wanders around for eternity. Most of the time, if there’s survivors, they’ll come back and police up the bodies. So, when we come back later, we’ll look around for those graves.”

Bert shook his head in understanding. “Makes sense.”

“I didn’t know that shit,” LG commented.

“We spotted some blood on the fallen tree that you all used for cover. Was that from your guys, Rock?”

“Yeah, we had to medivac two before moving out to our new location.”

“Hurt bad?”

“I heard from Top just before leaving this morning that both would be okay and would probably rest up in Cu Chi and be back in a few weeks.”

“That’s good news.” Sixpack referenced his map, “Where did the mortars fire from?”

“Due north about half a click,” Rock pointed to the jungle beyond the blast area.

“Okay, we’ll come back and check out that eastern trail after reconning this other area. Get your guys together and we’ll leave when you get here.”

Rock and Bert disappeared through the foliage to where the other two squads were pulling security.

Sixpack lit a cigarette, then spoke on the radio to let battalion know what they found and that the platoon would leave shortly for their next objective.

Even from 50 feet, Polack made out the noticeable jagged scar on Sgt. Holmes’ face. It started just above his top lip, a thick black mustache concealing most of it. then continued across the left side of his face, ending abruptly below the ear. Polack knew that it was the result of a car accident 12 years earlier, one that claimed the life of his older brother.

It was no secret that Sgt. Holmes was a former Drill Sergeant at Fort Polk, and that Polack, Larry, and a couple others in the Third Platoon had trained with him. Having spent a year in Vietnam with the First Cav in 1968, he volunteered for another tour shortly after AIT graduation in July, citing harassment by the civilians while on leave. He arrived a week before his former students, and now as the First Platoon Sergeant, he was responsible for

a couple of them once again. Small world! Sixpack got his nickname after being seen locking a 6-pack of beer in his duffel bag as a good luck talisman prior to coming out to the field. He planned to drink it on the way back home at the end of his tour. The duffel was locked securely in the company supply storage hut back in Cu Chi.

Ten minutes later, the platoon was on the move again. Rock and Frenchie once again led their individual columns through the dense jungle.

As the patrol continued north, the jungle surrounding them became withered and sparse.

“What happened to this part of the jungle?” Polack asked. “It looks like somebody sprayed weed killer all over it.”

“It is a weed killer,” Sixpack replied. “Special planes used to fly all through this country to spray defoliant on the jungle.”

“Why did they spray the countryside?”

“To eliminate and uncover all the enemy hiding places. They had names for the operation and for the shit they sprayed, but I can’t remember either of them. Hell, during my last tour, I can even remember them spraying while we were patrolling through the jungle below. The shit came down like a monsoon rain and smelled terrible. We used to get skin rashes that itched like hell and breathing problems from inhaling the stuff.”

“Was it dangerous?”

“Other than the rashes and stuff, everybody told us the stuff isn’t dangerous and not to worry about it.”

“This area smells like shit, too!” Scout added.

“Must be the decomposition,” Doc reported.

“Dead bodies have smelled better.”

All the porous tree stumps were havens for red ants, spiders, horseflies, and other crawling insects, which feasted on the rotting vegetation. Most of the men were preoccupied with taking defensive measures against the small insects instead of focusing on the patrol. Red ants stung unmercifully; horseflies left welts after biting their victims, and hundreds of spiders sent chills down the spines of the young men.



