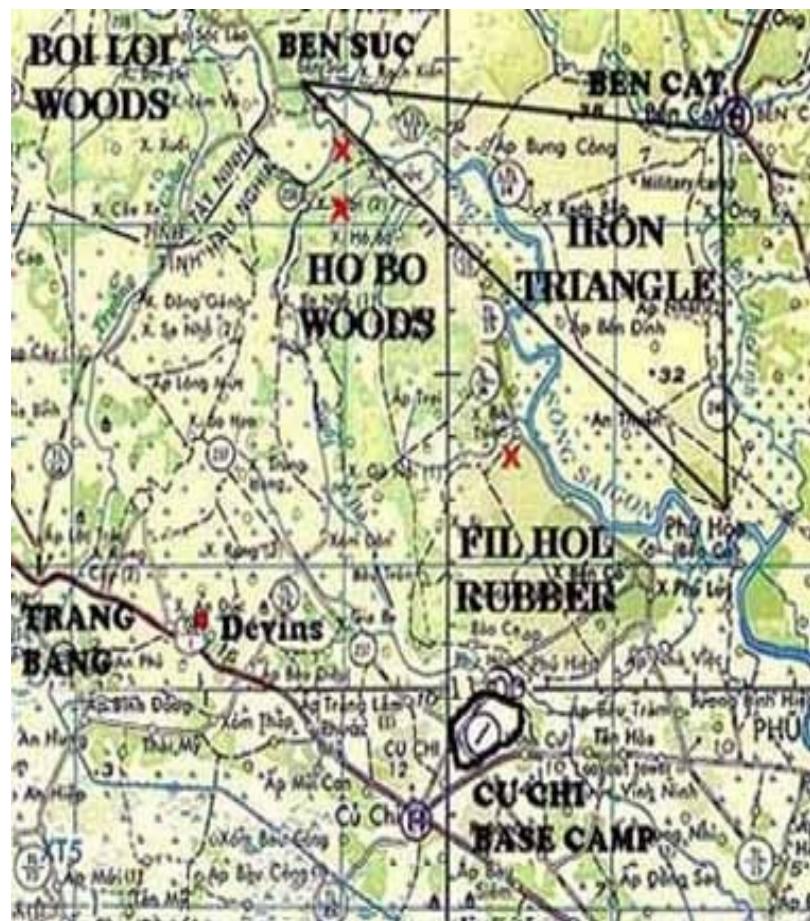


Maps showing the location of the Iron Triangle



The Iron Triangle is within the circled area



Chapter One

SG. Holmes of the First Platoon, also known as Sixpack, brushed the flap aside and entered the large green canvas tent that the First Platoon Wolfhounds called "Home" while 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; the body odor of thirty unbathed soldiers. The men worked hard and sweated profusely since their arrival—digging holes, filling sandbags, laying concertina wire, building bunkers, patrolling, and going out on ambushes. They looked forward to the portable showers scheduled to be erected later that week. In the meantime, everyone smelled the same, so nobody noticed the pungent odor.

The six-foot-four muscular, broad-shouldered staff sergeant wore his patrol gear. Battle suspenders draped his shoulders, two smoke grenades, four concussion grenades, and two first-aid bandage packs hung from embedded metal clips sewn into the material. The suspenders supported a weighted web belt with two ammo pouches, each filled with four eighteen-round magazines, and two canteens of water - one over each hip. An ammo bandolier draped across his chest; a la Pancho Villa held seven twenty-round clips in individual pouches. Sixpack's pockets on both his shirt and pants bulged outward, stuffed with C-ration tins, a map, bug juice, a couple of flares, and other necessities he needed for the patrol. A green boony hat covered his sandy-colored hair - small tufts of curly strands poking out from the sides. A green cloth towel straddled his shoulders. An M-16 rifle in his right hand, completed the ensemble.

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 and sounded like a plunger in a waste-filled toilet. Small whirlpools in the water marked his path. Sleeping soldiers lay in various positions on wood-framed green canvas cots along both sides of the swamped aisle. These cots were quite uncomfortable for most people over five feet tall; the wood poles at both ends tended to cut off circulation and numb legs during most sleepless nights. Every fully clothed soldier still wore his muddy boots with red caked mud resembling pie crust splattered across their trouser legs, almost reaching their knees. Some soldiers were covered with poncho liners against the chill of night. Others, who had been on duty all night, had simply lain on their stomachs on the taut canvas, using either poncho liners or arms as pillows. Light snoring complemented the outdoor sound of a waking firebase.

The greenish-brown canvas side walls of the tent would soon roll up in preparation for the upcoming heat of the day. The tied rolls of tarp-like material 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; just high enough to allow light to filter in and a cross-breeze to flow through.

Rucksacks, helmets, weapons, extra ammo, boxes of C-rations, and other personal items sat 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. Fire missions from the artillery guns awoke almost everyone nearby. Only those troops whose tours were ending could sleep through uninterrupted.

First Platoon's responsibility the night before was to provide security for the firebase. Thirty-two members split duties: the Second Squad conducted an overnight ambush, two soldiers from the First Squad had to go out on a Listening Post (LP), and the rest staffed perimeter bunkers. Uninterrupted sleep was rare both in the bush and in a firebase, since watches took place in shifts. The first or last watch provided the best chance of a decent night's sleep but was not a guarantee, especially when it called for a fifty or one-hundred percent alert all night long.

At daybreak, the war continued with new assignments. Sleeping in was a memory from home. Soldiers learned fast to catch some *zzzs* whenever the opportunity arose, and many learned to fall asleep standing up.

Polack (PFC. John Kowalski) and LG (PFC. Louis Gladwell) were on that LP and reported many enemy soldiers stopping and moving past their position. Shortly after, five 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 Second Squad blew its ambush and killed nine enemy soldiers, recovering a mortar base plate, ten mortar rounds, two hundred rounds of 7.62mm ammo for AK-47s, bags of rice, tins of fish and chicken, personal effects, cigarettes, official documents, letters, and a map. The intelligence group was salivating and could not wait to scrutinize the bounty turned in at the Tactical Operation Center (TOC) earlier that morning.

The final incident occurred a couple of hours before sunrise. The LP reported some new movement to their front and reacted by tossing grenades at the perceived threat. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a family of rock apes, who retaliated by tossing large stones at them for trespassing into their domain. Updates of incidents occurring outside of the firebase circulated slowly, however, Polack's and LG's experience on LP with the rock apes had spread like wildfire. When Rock's ambush squad and the LP returned that morning, they were treated to a barrage of jokes and teasing, making for a humble day.

Sixpack kicked at boots hanging over the end of the cots; clumps of dried mud dropped off and fell into the swamp resulting in 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 thirty 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.”

“Hey, man. We took fire during our ambush and lost a couple guys and had to pack up and move in the pitch-black darkness. Then, on top of that, we had to haul all that gook shit back with us this morning.”

“I heard that!”

“Can it!” Sixpack shouted. “We all suffered last night. Be at the gate in thirty minutes and don't be late!” Wading through the shallow muck toward the entranceway, he left the tent.

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

Polack and LG walked out together and headed to the mess tent for breakfast. "I hope we don't hear anymore shit about the apes from our listening post last night," LG grumbled.

"Me, neither, bro. I about shit my pants when that happened."

"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 last night. LG had spent time working his 'do' which was perfect and in the shape of a shiny bowling ball. His boony hat sat on top like a clown hat, swaying side-to-side with his 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 hard that it captured all his hair and bottomed out on the top of his ears.

Rodriguez, nicknamed Rock, was a Hispanic from New Mexico with a chiseled physique, tan complexion, and jet-black hair. An avid weightlifter, he created a makeshift set of barbells and dumbbells at the firebase from pipe and cement-filled paint cans on the ends. Other soldiers envied his square chin, tight facial features, and sixpack abs. He reminded many of the Sgt. Rock comic book character, so the nickname stuck.

Polack glanced at LG's soggy hat. "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."

They 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-completed skin, was now tanned to a dark bronze from the hot, tropical sun. He sported bleached out medium-brown hair, and a light mustache, the hair slightly longer than regulation. This was his sixth month in-country; the last two primarily spent in the jungle and away from the main base camp and forward fire support bases. Where they were, personal grooming was low on the list of daily priorities. With no one to impress, nobody cared how they looked. His shaggy hair was not an issue, at least not here at Firebase Lynch.

LG stood two inches taller than Polack with a slightly lankier build. The Black soldier had light caramel-colored skin, a long and narrow face, with a forehead lightly pitted with old acne scars. LG had 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, and unwilling to give up on the plan. LG had just begun his fourth month in Vietnam and had been carrying the platoon radio since his arrival.

Both were involved whenever a pick-up game of basketball happened in the firebases or rear area during a three-day break from the bush. However, they always found themselves on opposing teams.

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 Command Post (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 onto one of the extended front legs to keep it balanced. A feedbox with one hundred rounds was attached to the side of the pig (slang for the M-60), and Polack had three hundred more wrapped around his waist.

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

The remainder of Polack's First Squad, Frenchie, Wild Bill, Scout, Doc, and BJ, seemed animated in their discussions about the upcoming patrol. All had worked hard during the last week and a half, filling sandbags, and building fortifications within the new firebase. This patrol was a welcome change of pace.

When Polack neared the gate, BJ, his assistant gunner, left the group of soldiers and hurried out to meet him. Outfitted like the others, he also carried another three hundred machine gun rounds encircling his waist like Polack.

From Alabama, BJ tried to be a "good ole boy." He was the newest member of the squad and had only been in-country six weeks. The men nicknamed him BJ and assigned him to Polack as an ammo bearer and assistant gunner 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 had walked into the booby trap. When stepping out onto the trail, they found four dead Viet Cong (VC) soldiers; three others fired at them while running away. The dead gooks saved both BJ and the platoon from dire consequences. BJ was scared straight from that point on and had not fallen asleep on watch ever again.

"Is it true what they're saying—that y'all threw grenades at a bunch of monkeys last night?" he asked when reaching Polack.

“Really?” Polack looked around and noticed smirks on the faces of 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.”

“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 aloud.

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 had 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, he thought he was blind 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 had been instrumental in helping Polack learn the ropes.

With jet black hair that hung over his forehead and ears, the Indian had high cheekbones and a pointed nose that accentuated his tanned and slender face. He wore an authentic Indian ancestral headband which complimented the beads he wore around his neck. Scout carried pictures in his wallet that showcased 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 noticed that Polack was in a defensive posture and prepared to intercede if the discussion got out of hand. Twenty-eight armed men participating in a heated discussion could quickly 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 he’d won in one of his many rodeo competitions. Wild Bill’s real name was also 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 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, and white phosphorus rounds, thirty 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 did his job.

Doc, a Black man 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. He was also the philosopher in the platoon and often shared words of wisdom with the group.

He often spoke about friendship and camaraderie, stating that squad members unknowingly develop a special bond with one another. It was based upon trust and dependency on each other for moral support and strength. ‘Troops may not see one another after Vietnam, but they will all remember that special bond forever,’ he once said.

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

Monkey screeches continued from the Fourth Squad and several stones landed nearby. Polack and LG had gathered some stones and were ready to retaliate when Sixpack arrived.

“Knock off the bullshit!” Sixpack cautioned, staring down individuals in the Fourth Squad. After fifteen seconds, he continued. “Okay, gather around.”

He waved them in and waited until the twenty-eight members of the platoon surrounded him, as if in a huddle during a football game. When they were all in place, he began the briefing.

“As you all know, Polack and LG were almost discovered on LP last night by twenty or more gooks who took a break almost on top of them, and they might have been 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 apes?” 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 expression on his face. “Go ahead and tell them what happened, Polack. Then that’s the end of it! Understood?”

Polack cleared his throat. “As Sixpack said, we had about twenty North Vietnamese Army (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 as the soldiers became 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 Command Platoon (CP) RTO 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 on edge thinking that somebody might be wandering around between us and the firebase. When the artillery fired, we could see those flashes and the fires that started afterward. Later when Rock sprung his ambush, we had rounds zipping by overhead. Luckily, we huddled in a slight depression or we’d a been toast.”

LG nodded and grunted in affirmation periodically, as if he were acknowledging a preacher’s sermon during church.

“Now, after all that, we both heard twigs snapping and brush moving to our front. We were about to fire our Claymores 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," Polack continued, as all heads bowed in concentration so as not to miss any of the story.

"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 back 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 differently?"

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 stated.

"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 now curious themselves and wanted to see exactly what was thrown at their two platoon brothers. Conversations ceased and no one made any more 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 and slapped palms with LG and Polack, then moved 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 twenty-five pounds of supplies in his medical bag, the strap draped across a shoulder.

When Sixpack 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 and the LP last night, other members of the First Platoon had not gone beyond the wire, spending almost two weeks building the firebase. All suffered blisters on their hands, primarily from digging, which had already broken after a couple of days and were now replaced by callouses. On top of that, they got stuck with perimeter bunker guard on two nights.

Grunts get nervous 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 staff sergeant ordered.

The soldiers pulled back on the charging handles of their weapons and let them slam forward. The spring-activated cylinder loaded a single round from the magazine and drove it into the firing chamber with a loud metallic clang. All their weapons were now hot and ready to fire.

"Move out!"

Chapter Two

Firebase 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 troubling 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 part of the country. Much of the Triangle then became a *free fire zone*, and anyone active was considered the enemy. Soldiers were cleared to shoot first without requiring clearance. Those remaining villages on the outskirts of the Triangle were extremely supportive of both the VC and 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.

A substantial amount of 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 it all and inserted the First Battalion Twenty-Seventh Infantry (Wolfhounds) of the Twenty-Fifth 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 thirty feet apart. Rock and his men continued along on the right, the Fourth Squad following them. Frenchie took the point for the First Squad on the left, with Third Squad bringing up the rear of that column.

The engineers used Rome plows to push back the jungle two hundred meters beyond the wire, providing those bunker guards on the perimeter with an unobstructed view and open fields of fire in the event of enemy ground attacks. However, the rain from the night before had 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 to their feet and then continued as if nothing happened. Miraculously, nobody twisted an ankle or hurt themselves during the short hump through the wasteland.

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

The damp ground and musty smell made Polack uncomfortable. When he turned and looked back into the clearing, the bright sunlight affected his eyes the same 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, but the soldiers easily maneuvered through them without full packs on their backs.

After hacking through the vegetation for thirty 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 was cut through the jungle and ended at the main hardpacked trail between the two columns about twenty feet away. It looked like a tunnel in the jungle, clear enough for a file of soldiers to walk through.

SSG. Holmes and LG followed it and exited onto the hard-packed trail that both the ambush team and enemy soldiers followed the day before.

"That must be the path cut by the gooks we heard last night," LG volunteered, lifting a fish tin into the air from the end of a stick. "And here's where they stopped for their break."

Sixpack sniffed at the empty container. "Smells like sardines."

A slight rustle sounded in the jungle to their right as Sgt. Rock, his RTO, and the rest of his squad exited from the new trail. "This wasn't here yesterday," he commented.

"Yeah, LG said that's where the gooks came from last night and chowed down right where you're standing," Sixpack said.

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

Polack watched 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 twenty feet above the trail, was still filled with water and surrounded by thick brush.

"Hey, Polack," Sixpack beckoned.

The machine gunner turned to face his SSG.

"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 thirty 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 blown bare for about twenty 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 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. LG and Polack glanced over the area and nodded their heads in response.

"Why don't you both take a look around for those dud grenades," Sixpack commanded, turning to the soldiers.

"Will do," Polack replied, pulling LG by the arm in passing and leading him toward their former hide.

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

"Odd that such a well-used trail runs across the entire eastern portion of the firebase," Sixpack commented.

"And less than half a klick away from the perimeter," Rock acknowledged.

"Yeah, but this trail's been here long before we arrived," Sixpack said, wiping 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 Sixpack, Rock, and his RTO returned to the junction in the trail, LG and Polack joined them a moment later, holding large rocks in their hands.

"No sign of grenades, but we found these. They stood out like a sore thumb on the ground with nothing else coming close," Polack said. The four rocks were in the shape of large Idaho potatoes and 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 in the head."

"Would have caused some major pain if they hit you anywhere else," 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 smiled.

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

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

"Okay, line 'em up. We move out in two minutes," Sixpack announced.

Sgt. Rock and his RTO returned with their squads through the same tunnel they exited earlier. Everyone else left their perimeter positions and lined back up in a column formation, twenty 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 had taken place there —brass casings from weapons of both sides littered the trail, glistening in the small opening like dropped gems on this narrow, bloody path. The dead enemy soldiers were gone.

Just like at the LP, the exploding Claymore mines flattened the foliage on the other side of the trail. But blood splatters and pieces of flesh and clothing were evident on the surrounding foliage where they now stood. 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 the quadrant until they faced due north. Frenchie positioned himself ten feet beyond Doc, aiming his M-79 grenade launcher toward the jungle beyond the Claymore blast area.

The Third Squad set up and covered the quadrant from Frenchie to the west, facing the way they came, while the 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," he shared, pointing to the south side of the trail.

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

"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 measure, we put another about fifty feet into the jungle to our front, expecting them to exit in that direction after triggering the ambush."

Sixpack, LG, Rock, and his RTO 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," Rock volunteered.

"How many bodies did you say you counted, Rock?"

"There were at least nine, Sixpack, 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?" Rock's RTO asked.

Sixpack looked at the short, disheveled RTO with red hair and freckles. "Most Vietnamese are Buddhists and believe that their souls will wander around for all eternity if their bodies are not

properly buried after death. Most of the time, if there are survivors, they'll come back and police-up the bodies. So, when we come back later, we'll look around for those graves."

"Makes sense," the RTO responded.

"I didn't know that shit," LG said.

"We spotted some blood on the fallen tree that you all used for cover. Was it from any of your guys, Rock?" Sixpack asked.

"Yeah, we had to medevac two before moving out to our new location."

"Hurt bad?"

"I heard from Top just before leaving this morning that both will be okay and will rest up in Cu Chi before returning in a month or so."

"That's good news," Sixpack said, looking at his map. "Where did the mortars fire from?"

"Due north about half a klick." 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," Sixpack ordered.

Rock and his RTO 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 fifty feet, Polack made out the noticeable jagged scar on SSG. Holmes's 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 twelve years earlier, one that claimed the life of Sixpack's older brother.

SSG. Holmes was a former Drill Sergeant at Fort Polk. Polack and a couple of 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 them once again.

Sixpack got his nickname after locking a six-pack of beer in his duffel bag as a good luck talisman before coming out to the field. He planned to drink it on the way back home at the end of his tour. The duffel bag was secured along with everyone else's in the company supply storage hootch back in Cu Chi.

Ten minutes later, the platoon was on the move again. Just as before, Rock and Frenchie led their 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?" BJ asked. "It looks like somebody sprayed weed killer all over it."

"It is a weed killer," Sixpack replied. "Special planes and helicopters flew all through this country to spray defoliant on parts of 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 any 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 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 other shit, everybody said the stuff wasn’t dangerous and not to worry about it.”

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

“Must be the decomposition,” Doc added.

“Dead bodies have smelled better,” Wild Bill said.

All the porous tree stumps were havens for every crawling insect that 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, and hundreds of spiders sent chills down the spines of the young men.