

The Fork in the Trail
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The narrow trail was lined with thick underbrush and the heavy canopy overhead allowed only patches of sunlight to filter down here and there. The 1st Platoon, Charlie Company, 3/21 Infantry had been ordered to find and eliminate enemy positions somewhere up this trail. The NVA positions on this hill had prevented C Company from recovering two dead G.I.'s who were ambushed in the valley below the previous day.

When John came to the fork in the trail, he stopped and then squatted down. His eyes were searching, ears on the alert. Finally, with his left hand he motioned for Red, his squad leader, to come forward. Together they slowly scanned the underbrush. Something didn't feel right. In situations like this, Red would usually go up the trail ten or fifteen meters to scout it out. On this day, John took off in the lead. He had only gone a few meters when an NVA soldier sprang up from a trench line. Spraying the area with AK-47 rounds only one of the bullets hit John. It was in the head and he was dead before he hit the ground. At the first burst of gunfire, Red hit the ground several feet behind John. His mind was frantically trying to figure out if he had been hit from the enemy gun fire. From down the trail a voice shouted, "Are you okay"? Red shouted back, "Yes, but John is dead." AK rounds again filled the air above Red's head. Silence. Again the voice, "Are you sure?" "He's dead!" This time Red heard the familiar thud of five or six Chi-com grenades as they hit the ground near him. The concussion, explosion and grenade frags were all absorbed by the thick jungle vegetation. Red lay still, very very still.

Strung out in single file down along the trail was the rest of the 1st Platoon. Little beads of sweat loaded with anger and frustration clung to our brows. We were gripped by the infantryman's dichotomy of fear and the desire to attack and kill the enemy. However, there was no place to go, no place to maneuver, nothing to kill, nothing to do but wait frustrated, tired and angry.

A muttering of voices came from up the trail. That was followed by softly spoken orders. An M-60 gunner named Roger had worked his way up to a small piece of high ground and set up his gun near a tree. Suddenly an order was shouted. Roger opened up with his M-60. The rounds slashed through the trees and bushes. Roger poured in more and more rounds as Red quickly low crawled back down the trail.





Our Platoon Leader, “Flash” Gordon, again wanted confirmation about John from Red. It was given. Now all we could do was wait until the order was given to withdraw down the hill back into the valley. We'd be back up that hill the next day. Only now there were three dead men to recover as they lay in the sweltering tropical heat of the nightmare called Vietnam.