The Tenth Level

by clgfanfic

Summary

Paul goes on another mission with Zeke and the boys.

Notes

Originally published in the zine Green Floating Weirdness #11 and later in Black Ops #2 under the pen name Gillian Holt.

"Where's that dust-off?"

Lt. Myron Goldman watched while Captain Paul Ironhorse read the warning orders for their next mission with cool detachment. Goldman was sure the stoic expression on the officer's angular red-bronze face hid the same unease he felt himself.

Leaning back in his chair, the lieutenant allowed a thin smile to settle on his face. He was looking forward to working with the captain again, even if the mission promised to be a real pain in the ass. He frowned. How the hell did he end up in a situation like this anyway? He and his men were not trained for this kind of mission. But when had that ever made a difference?

His gaze flickered to a closed file folder. He and Paul would each command full twelve-man A-teams, with an additional A-team backup. They'd insert into dense, enemy-controlled terrain about five klicks apart. His primary responsibility would be to observe enemy movements, as well as locate and destroy a COSVN radio transmitter that had fallen into enemy hands, and which had been broadcasting from somewhere near his insertion LZ. Since they'd be in the
neighborhood the Brass figured there was no good reason why they couldn't drop by and tear it down.

Goldman shook his head. No use worrying about it now. Ironhorse's people would have a rougher time. They were going in as a killer team, intercepting and ambushing small NVA units moving through the valley.

He sighed silently, glad he hadn't been asked to lead the B-unit. Ironhorse was Special Forces and so were his men. They were trained for these kinds of actions. The Brass had their fingers crossed that Paul's team would get a crack at Colonel Mot, the commander of the infamous 5th NVA Regiment. The colonel had been making life miserable for them the past several weeks. It was payback time.

Goldman opened his briefing folder again, his gaze sweeping over the papers. It looked so simple in black and white, but he knew it wasn't. Details leaped out at him, setting off warning bells.

Ironhorse and McKay had overflown the area yesterday. There was only one LZ in Paul's entire four-klick-square AO. Goldman knew Ironhorse wouldn't be happy about that. If he got in trouble they'd have to E&E into Goldman's RZ almost five klicks away.

The distance wasn't too bad, and his AO was full of LZs. Still, the whole thing felt... odd. The entire valley was Indian country. Big time. It was also twenty miles out from base camp. Combine that with no LZs in half the AO and things could deteriorate real fast. Too fast.

Goldman knew the same thoughts were foremost in Paul's mind as he reached the end of the documentation and his lips pressed into a thin line.

Intelligence reports said there were several thousand enemy troops in the valley, including a sapper battalion in their neighborhood. And, to top it all off, they'd be inserting at dusk. Life had suddenly become very interesting for the two officers. Their troubled gazes met across the table.

"Times like this I wonder what the weather's like in Canada," Goldman joked.

Ironhorse's eyebrows peaked and fell. "Don't know about Canada, but I do know what the weather's going to be like out there."

Goldman nodded. "Hot. Too damned hot."

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Sergeant Zeke Anderson watched while the four A-teams spent most of the day preparing for the mission. The men were tense and packing heavy, cramming in extra frags, bandolera and claymores. The additional weight would slow them down, but if things went wrong they'd have to hang on for twenty minutes or longer before help could reach them. And that was a hell of a long time in the bush.

It wasn't a comforting thought that if they walked into a squad of Charlies or NVA, it would be up to them and the folks at the firebases to keep things sane until help arrived.

Anderson sucked in a deep breath and let it out slow. It was just another mission. Like any other. Nothing special. But it didn't feel like any other mission.
He shook his head, swearing softly under his breath. He couldn't get spooked. His boys would pick up on it. Anderson's gaze swept over the soldiers again. Ironhorse's unit he knew. The men were well trained SF, capable and cool. They didn't look worried in the slightest, and that, more than anything, eased Anderson's apprehension. Lt. Granger and his troops were infantry, but they’d seen more than their fair share of field action. He was glad Granger's people were inserting with them. Ironhorse wasn’t as lucky. He was taking Lt. Allport in as his second team.

Todd "Dipshit" Allport was dangerous. Worse, he was stupid and dangerous.

Ironhorse's first-shirt meandered by, stopping to join Anderson in the shade of the supply shed roof. "Well," Derriman drawled in his Kentucky finest, "ain't this just a bitch?"

Zeke grinned. "Now that's the truth, John."

"Say, ya wanna swap? You can have Allport and his kiddies. The Cap and me'll take Granger?"

Anderson shook his head. "Nope. Don't think so."

"I was 'fraid you'd say that."

Anderson slapped Derriman on the back. "Sometimes God is just—"

"A motherfucker," Derriman inserted, then chuckled.

"See ya on the pad, Sarge."

"Yep, I'll be there."

Ironhorse watched while Goldman and his team took off, heading out fifteen minutes before he and his people were scheduled to go. It was something they’d demanded so the C&C ship and the Cobra escorts could circle back and link up with his people after Goldman had inserted. They needed all the cover they could get.

Watching his people assemble nearby, Paul felt the usual pre-mission rush kick in. Derriman gave him a thumbs up. His men were ready to go. He made eye contact with Allport. The young man's head tipped haughtily, and Ironhorse's teeth ground. He did not like Allport. He was too damned gung-ho; too excited by the killing. But he was stuck with "Dipshit" and he'd have to make the best of it. He just hoped no one in his unit would decide to frag the asshole.

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The chopper lifted off and swung over lazily, heading west toward the mountains. Ironhorse watched the green carpeted peaks growing larger. They looked shadowy, ominous and he reached automatically for the talis pouch he wore under his uniform, rubbing it through the
material for luck. Why was he nervous? What was different about this mission? It wasn’t the first time he’d been sent on something like this.

The enemy was down there. They were all sure of that. But that was nothing new…

A strange sense of foreboding settled over Ironhorse as they came on station. The C&C ship and the gunships hung above them in high orbit. Goldman’s people were settled. It was their turn. Allport’s team would go in first, Ironhorse and his squad last.

Paul let his gaze swing through the chopper, making eye-contact with each of the men under his command. Each acknowledged him in his own way—a smile, a thumbs-up, a serious nod, a casual salute. It was time.

"Pump it up, people!" Derriman bellowed. "It's time t' rock n' roll!"

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Lt. Nick Ryder, Ironhorse's pilot, kicked the chopper into a wide, spiraling descent, funneling down toward a level, grassy clearing just off a long, winding ridge line. The sunlight was just beginning to fade and the second chopper, with Lt. Johnny McKay at the controls, already hovered over the LZ.

McKay's bird seemed to hang there for minutes, rising and falling above the grass. Ironhorse squinted into the dusk, trying to see what was holding them up. Finally, heavily clad SF troops dropped from the skids into the grass below. The first two men down disappeared into the swirl of green.

"That's a ravine full of elephant grass!" Derriman yelled into Ironhorse's ear.

"Damnit," Paul hissed, shaking his head. "It's a scrub. The LZ's— Shit!"

Allport exited the first chopper, commanding the remaining soldiers to drop. Ironhorse could see that the men obeyed, albeit reluctantly. They were committed now.

"Idiot!" he snarled. "Fucking dipshit idiot!"

Lt. Ryder jockeyed the chopper into position over the LZ as McKay headed off, trying to edge away from the center. Ironhorse looked down from his perch on the edge of the chopper's floor. Allport was a fool! The top of the elephant grass was still eight to ten feet below the skids, the main rotor making salad out of the tree tops on both side of the LZ, and then there was the rest of the drop…

Ryder hovered lower, and Ironhorse signaled, he and his team climbing out onto the skids. Squatting down, they hung from the vibrating skids by their hands. The strain on Ironhorse's shoulders was nearly unbearable. He said a quick prayer and let go.

The two-foot drop to the grass was nothing, but the twelve foot fall from the top of the grass to the ground jammed Ironhorse's legs into his hip sockets, compressing his spine. Painfully he climbed to his feet, feeling several inches shorter. Above the grass he could hear the chopper fading into the distance. Glancing around, he spotted Derriman and Carpenter as they emerged from the waving green. They looked okay. Allport, however, was a different matter.
The lieutenant had landed on an old teak log, lying concealed in the grass. He sat up as the threesome reached him.

"Motherfuck," the officer hissed. "God-damn, motherfucking pilot—"

"What the hell were you thinking, mister?" Ironhorse growled, squatting down next to Allport, his eye narrowed into dangerous slits.

The lieutenant sucked in a breath as Carpenter slid in and started to check his already swelling ankle. "Didn't think it'd be so deep. That damned—"

The big black medic glanced up at Paul. "Sir, we should get him extracted before the insertion ship reaches the camp. This don't look good."

Ironhorse nodded, but Allport forced himself up, sitting on the log. "No. Absolutely not. I'm staying with the team. It's just a sprain. Wrap it."

Carpenter shook his head slightly and Ironhorse answered with a shrug. "Fine, but if it gets worse, you're out of here."

Allport glared at the Cherokee, but nodded.

Reaching out, the medic helped Allport through the high grass to the edge of the jungle where they found the rest of the two teams waiting for them, several men fanned out to give them cover.

"Any bumps or bruises?" Carpenter asked. Heads shook. At least everyone else had made it down without injuries. Pointing to the ground, he made quick work of wrapping Allport's ankle, then signaled they were ready to go.

Ironhorse nodded, double-checked his map and signaled the men to form up. With a wave they moved into the double-canopy jungle. The surface vegetation was light to moderate, and even in the failing light Paul could see clearly for eight to twelve meters. At least they had a little luck on their side. So far.

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They covered about ten meters before the point man held up a clenched fist.

The two teams dropped into cover, Ironhorse making his way forward quickly and silently. Tommy Monk gestured and Ironhorse nodded grimly. A well-used, high-speed trail, just the sort of thing they expected to find.

He squinted into the gathering darkness. The trail seemed to follow along the base of the east-west ridgeline above them. The branches and tree limbs overhead had been laced together to cover the footpath and prevent detection from the air.

Ironhorse motioned Derriman and Carpenter forward, sending them on point-recon up the path to the east. With a wave two others headed down the trail to the west.
Derriman and the medic made it about fifty meters before finding a well-placed trail watcher's bunker at the side of the path. Nestled where the hidden trail turned to the left and started a gradual climb toward the center of the ridge, it was a perfect spot for observing movement in either direction. Thank God it was empty.

Moving cautiously, the two men continued. On their right flank the terrain dropped off sharply. On their left, the ridge top pulled up into a short knoll overlooking the trail. The crest of the ridgeline above them did a little dogleg before continuing to the east. They moved up further, the trail turning sharply back to the right, following the crest of the ridge.

"Let's check another 100 meters," Derriman said in a whisper.

Carpenter nodded. "Light a fire under it, Sarge." It was getting hard to see and they were already 150 meters from their position—not a situation that made the medic comfortable.

Derriman led the way down the crest of the ridge. A single rifle shot three hundred meters east of their position froze both men in the shadows.

Derriman took a deep breath, swallowed hard and walked backwards in slow, measured steps. When he reached Carpenter, the medic tapped his shoulder. Facing forward, the sergeant turned his head, whispering, "Bet that's a warnin' shot. They know we're in."

"Let's get the hell out of Dodge, Serge," was Carpenter's soft reply.

The pair backtracked down the trail, rejoining Ironhorse and the rest of the two teams. The other recon element had already returned, reporting beaucoup fresh signs of activity to the west.

Derriman described the single shot.

"We thought it was you," Orlando said, checking the tape around his extra magazines.

"No, man," Carpenter said. "It's Mr. Charles. He knows we're here."

Derriman nodded, then told Ironhorse about the knoll.

"Good place to set up an ambush?" Paul asked. Derriman and Carpenter both nodded their agreement. "That's what we need," he said. "Lead on, gentlemen."

The teams moved out in patrol formation, except for Allport and the two men helping him. The lieutenant was in considerable pain and limping slowly. Ironhorse gauged Allport's speed and mobility and knew he wouldn't be able to keep up if they had to E&E.

* One thing at a time, Paul told himself. One thing at a time. *

They covered the distance quickly and the men moved off the trail and onto the knoll just as darkness settled over them. Six of Ironhorse's men dropped their rucksacks and moved off down
the trail to set their claymores, six of Allport's men providing them cover. It was too dark to daisy-chain the claymores together, so the men settled for overlapping kill zones.

Derriman set the last of the explosives hard up against a low embankment between the knoll and the trail, making sure that when it went off it would cover about a ten meter length of the trail, waist high. Carpenter grinned at the positioning and camouflaged his own against the base of a large tree, five meters up the trail.

Ironhorse moved among them, checking. When he was satisfied with the placement of the claymores, he nodded. The soldiers inserted blasting caps and fed wire back up to the knoll, carefully covering it with leaves and sticks. Reaching their positions, they attached the wires to charging handles.

Ironhorse knew that they were less than ten meters from the kill zone. If the men didn't remember to stay down when they blew the ambush the backlash from the claymores could be deadly. The ambush would cover a kill zone of about twenty-five to thirty meters. The setup would handle a ten to twenty man enemy patrol traveling at normal intervals.

Moving back to the center of their perimeter, Paul watched his troops settle in, some quietly downing c-rations before total darkness covered them. He sat back against his rucksack, making sure his weapon was in easy reach at his left side. He laid out four frags and three extra magazines on his right side.

Why was he still wired? It was going fine. Nothing unusual.

He listened to the sounds of the jungle increase in intensity, thousands of insects beginning their nightly concert of chirps, clicks, whistles, buzzing and humming. It blended together in an earsplitting chorus of continuous noise, like someone had turned up the volume on some weird radio. It was frustrating. He strained to make out any out-of-place sounds – the snap of a dry stick being stepped on, the swish of something large moving through the brush, the light thumping of footsteps on the bare surface of the trail, the metallic click of a safety being flipped to fire…

"Derriman," he called softly. The sergeant materialized off his left elbow. "I want everyone on full alert until midnight. Fifty-percent 'til dawn."

Derriman nodded. "Got a bad feelin' about this one, Cap?"

Ironhorse gave a slight sigh. "Yeah."

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2300 hours. Orlando spotted lights moving toward their position from the east. An enemy patrol. Reaching out, he tapped the man next to him. The silent signal was quickly relayed to Ironhorse.

The captain silently joined Orlando.

The approaching patrol was quiet, on alert. Looking for them. Ironhorse signaled to let the patrol pass. The soldiers lay back, waiting.

Other groups passed their position during the long night. Squads, followed by larger units. Ironhorse knew they were trying to bait him into ambushing one group so the second could nail
them.

*Not buying*, he thought silently.

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The sun rose on a clear, calm day. Allport's ankle was so swollen he couldn't lace his boot. He tried to stand, but the weight immediately brought tears to the lieutenant's eyes.

Ironhorse knew he wouldn't be able to walk. "Lieutenant, I'm sending you with three back to the LZ for extraction."

"No, I—"

"No arguments, Lieutenant."

Allport swore, but nodded his agreement.

"Orlando, Monk, Casper," Paul called. The three men stepped forward. "Take Lt. Allport back to the LZ. I'll call in a dust-off."

"Yes, sir."

Two of the soldiers offered their shoulders for support. Allport hobbled into place and they lifted him, moving into the jungle toward the LZ.

Ironhorse motioned his radioman over. "Chicken Coop, this is Little Fox, Over?"

"Go ahead, Little Fox."

"Chicken Coop, I need dust-off with a body basket. Have one wounded. Four for extraction."

"Roger dust-off with body basket. ETA at your location at 0730."

"Roger. Little Fox, out."

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At 0732 the dust-off buzzed in for an approach. From their position on the knoll it was relatively easy to watch the maneuver.

"Little Fox, this is Blackbird, do you copy?"

"Affirmative, Blackbird. We'll signal by panel, no smoke."

"Roger that, Little Fox, we'll watch for sparks, no smoke."

The pick-up went smoothly, and five minutes later the chopper lifted out, moving down the
valley before climbing out and heading back to the east.

Two shots rang out three hundred meters to the east.

Ironhorse grinned. The NVA thought the whole unit had been extracted. The shots signaled an "all clear" to enemy troops in the area. It was a ploy he'd have to remember.

He checked his watch. It was close to 0800. "Chow down, then we dig in," he said.

Half the team broke out dehydrated rations, eating while the other half pulled security. In a few minutes the positions switched. The men moved quietly, on edge.

Voices echoed out of the foliage, approaching their position from up the trail. Everyone froze. Three NVA clad in green fatigues walked into their kill zone, chattering like they didn't have a care in the world.

Derriman picked up the charging handle to his claymore and waited for Ironhorse's signal. It didn't come. The captain let the enemy soldiers pass, waiting for bigger game.

Minutes passed, two more wandered by. Again Ironhorse held off blowing the ambush. Derriman wiped the sweat off his forehead. It was going to be a long morning.

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0930. More voices echoed down the trail. Derriman lay back against his ruck, thumbing the safety off the claymore charging device.

Ironhorse rose to his knees in the center of the perimeter, peering through the foliage at the approaching NVA. He felt the odd buzz that always settled in his gut before a big battle. This was it.

Watching the trail, he saw the first NVA enter the kill-zone ten meters away. The man was dressed in fatigues and a boonie cap. An OD towel hung around his neck. A full rucksack rode silently on his back.

Ironhorse snapped his fingers.

The signal. Derriman and the others released the pressure on the firing devices. Six claymores erupted simultaneously. The back-blast showered the Americans' position with sticks, leaves and dust.

The debris settled, noise of the blast fading, and an agonized moaning rolled in from the kill zone. There was movement down the trail toward the bunker. Their point man. Somehow he'd been spared and now he was sprinting down the trail, away from the ambush sight. Mr. Murphy had reared his ugly head.

Several of the soldiers brought up their weapons. One of Allport's men emptied an entire magazine at the fleeing NVA. Carpenter jumped to his feet and fired as he chased after the enemy. One of the medic's shots hit, but the man hunched over and continued to run, cutting to his left and disappearing into the jungle next to the trail.

Several of the soldiers eased into the kill zone, making sure the dead NVA stayed that way.
They gathered gear and weapons, then stripped the bodies and brought everything back to the center of the perimeter. It was a good haul: three rucks full of medical supplies, one full of documents, an AK-47, and three .45 caliber US issue automatic pistols. Ten KIA.

The sweet, sickening smell of blood, torn flesh, and burnt power hung in the air, gagging some of Allport's newbys. They'd ambushed an NVA medical unit. Four of the bodies were female. Nurses. Five were grunts. The other appeared to be some kind of staff officer.

Ironhorse's men headed back to their interrupted breakfasts. Paul reported the successful ambush to the rear, and reported the sack full of captured documents.

"Roger that, Little Fox," the CO, Major Eckland, replied. "Sit tight, Little Fox, I'll get a reaction force out there to secure the area and develop the situation."

"Affirmative, Chicken Coop," Ironhorse said. "Orders?"

"Prepare for extraction and reinsertion on the other side of the ridge, over."

"Roger, Chicken Coop. Ride on the way to join Red Rooster."

"Affirmative. Extra goodies on the slick."

"Roger. Little Fox, out." Ironhorse glanced at his watch. It was 1045.

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Forty-five minutes later, Eckland was back on the air. "Little Fox, negative on the reaction force. Negative on extraction. Repeat, no go."

"Roger. No reaction force. No extraction. Mind if I ask why, Chicken Coop?"

"Division's choppers are all committed, Little Fox. I'm coming out in LOH to cover until choppers are free."

"Roger, Chicken Coop. Hope you hurry."

"Already on the way, Little Fox."

Ironhorse handed the radio back. No one had to tell him or his men that they were royally fucked. The enemy had to be on to them. That meant they were going to be targets. Soon. He motioned to the radioman, who handed back the receiver.

"Chicken Coop. This is Little Fox. I want to move the teams to a more defensible position, closer to the LZ."

"Negative, Little Fox," the CO told him. "Move your unit higher up on the ridge. C&C ship will direct you to a new pickup point."

"Roger, Chicken Coop. Little Fox, out."

Ironhorse signaled his troops and they rucked up. They were ready to move when Eckland's LOH swooped in and began circling overhead. Ironhorse signaled for Allport's squad leader. The man stepped up. "Move up the ridge to where the jungle's starting to clear. Signal
the LOH with a mirror so they know where we are."

"Right, Cap," the man said, heading out on silent feet.

The sergeant went out fifteen meters, then stopped. He flashed the mirror. All hell broke loose. Several AK-47s opened up, hitting the sergeant in the arm, neck and chest. He fell.

The Americans sprayed the area with heavy fire. Carpenter sprinted out and began dragging the sergeant back toward the perimeter. Derriman darted forward, grabbing the wounded man from the other side, getting him to safety.

The soldiers dropped to the ground as the NVA poured heavy volume fire at their perimeter. Most of it came in high, showering their position with leaves and branches.

The radioman slid in next to Ironhorse. "Chicken Coop, this is Little Fox. We have contact. I need a dust-off."

"Little Fox, we're looking, but we're not finding. Hang tight, Brigade is releasing two Cobras. They'll be on station in ten."

"I need that dust-off now, Chicken Coop."

"No can do, Little Fox. There are none. We'll get one freed up ASAP."

Ironhorse handed the phone back to the RTO.

"Cap!"

Ironhorse scrambled to the soldier. An NVA platoon charged out of the jungle below them from the direction of the LZ. About forty meters away, they closed, moving in a broken formation from tree to tree.

"On the side!" Paul called and the men shifted, pouring heavy fire at the closing men. The NVA dropped. The charge hesitated, then broke. The soldiers tossed frags as the NVA broke contact and faded back into the jungle.

"Radio!" Ironhorse yelled. The RTO was there, handing the receiver over. "Chicken Coop. Little Fox. Where's that dust-off?"

"Dust-off is out ten," Eckland explained. "We still don't have you."

Ironhorse knew that would be a real problem when the medevac arrived on station. Paul glanced up as two Cobras arrived.

"Cap," the RTO said, "six is asking us to pop smoke."

"Derriman!" Ironhorse called.

"Got it, Cap! Popping yellow." Derriman tossed a yellow smoke grenade onto the trail. The smoke hissed out, running along the ground before working its way up through the overhead cover. By the time it cleared the treetops it had dissipated.

The RTO handed Ironhorse the receiver. "Little Fox," the major said. "We're not seeing smoke. I will crisscross the area. Report when we are directly over your position."

"Affirmative, Chicken Coop."
"Cap, we got movement!" Carpenter called.

Ironhorse moved to join the medic, the RTO man following like a shadow. The NVA maneuvered toward the Americans again, this time from two sides – west and south. Two jumped behind a large boulder, twenty meters down the hill toward the trail watcher's bunker. Grabbing a fragmentation grenade, Ironhorse jerked out the pin and let the lever fly, cooking off two seconds before he lobbed it over the top of the boulder. It detonated on impact, killing both enemy soldiers.

The surviving NVA charged from cover, racing for the hilltop, firing as they came. They were still shooting high and the Americans put down withering fire, stopping them cold at both points of attack.

Reluctant to face the heavy firepower, the enemy pulled back. They were holding their own, Ironhorse knew, but it wouldn't continue. They were running low on ammo.

"Sir!" the RTO said.

Ironhorse keyed the receiver. "You're on top, Chicken Coop!"

"Affirmative, Little Fox, we have a fix on your location. See some Indians in the bush. Stay low. I'm bringing the Cobras in."

The C&C ship flew over again, dropping a willie-peter grenade. Paul watched the fountain of white phosphorous erupt under the trees. It was beautiful. The Cobras came in behind Eckland, blasting the ridgeline with rockets. A second run, and they pulverized the jungle with automatic cannon fire.

The enemy attack tapered off, then subsided altogether. The LOH came in directly over them, marking the location for the incoming dust-off. Seconds later, the medevac was hovering, lowering a jungle penetrator through the treetops.

Ironhorse spotted the basket as it broke through the overhead canopy and spiraled toward them. They were right on target. Carpenter and Derriman quickly moved and strapped the wounded man in place, signaling all-clear. The medevac took up the slack and the sergeant was lifted through the trees to safety. Four more wounded followed.

The NVA struck as the dust-off pulled away, coming in from the southwest. The two teams opened up, driving them back with automatic weapons fire and a barrage of grenades. As the NVA withdrew, Ironhorse yelled to the men to stay down, then called in a Cobra. The chopper swooped in over them, miniguns firing, the sound like ripping canvas. Hot brass rained through the trees into their position. Smoke gathered, obscuring the fight as the thick vegetation prevented it from dissipating.

The frontal assaults were abandoned, the NVA settling down to sporadic harassing fire. It forced the Americans to keep their heads down, but it also gave Paul a break to analyze the situation. It wasn't good. He had sixteen men left, and most of them were down to less than ten mags apiece. He had two frags and a willie-pete left. There were several claymores, but no way to get them out where they could do any good.

Then came the bad news.

"Little Fox, this is Chicken Coop. The Big Bad Wolves are dry. They're heading back to rearm and refuel. We're running on fumes, so we're going with them. We'll be back as fast as we can. Hold tight. Another pair of Cobras are being turned over. They'll be on station soon."
"Roger.  Hurry back, Chicken Coop."

"You got it, Little Fox.  Good luck."

Then they were gone.  Dust and smoke disappeared, silence settling over the jungle.  The men fidgeted.  The sound of battle and choppers was reassuring, but with the silence that assurance faded.  They were faced with the hopelessness of the situation.

Ironhorse's lips pressed together into a thin line.  If he let the psychic tide turn, they'd be in real trouble.  He looked up, his hand reaching for the radio.  "Chicken Coop, this is Little Fox.  Any chance we can get a fire mission to liven things up around here?"

"Affirmative, Little Fox."

"Artillery!" someone said.

"That'll keep the gooks off us 'til the choppers get back," someone else said.

105 mm rounds from the firebase impacted the jungle around them.  Ironhorse stayed on the radio, walking the shells in to one hundred meters of their position.  The enemy moved inside the perimeter.  He backed the shells off.

"Damn it," he breathed.  "I'll drive 'em down our throats."

"Not if we walk 'em out the other way," Derriman said quietly.

Ironhorse met the sergeant's gaze.  It was a risky move, but they were running out of options.  If the NVA massed another assault, they might be overrun.

Paul walked the rounds in to fifty meters of their position.  Shrapnel sang through the treetops over their heads.  Occasionally, a piece of jagged, red-hot, smoking metal fell inside the perimeter, but the enemy moved back.

Ironhorse continued the artillery strike for forty-five minutes, until Eckland radioed that he was back on station, this time with four Cobras.  Ironhorse halted the fire mission, allowing the CO to direct the Cobras back into battle, providing close-in support.

It was 1330.

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Derriman watched Ironhorse over his shoulder.  The captain was up on one knee next to his RTO, the handset pressed to his right ear.  On the east side of the perimeter, Horst yelled that the enemy was moving up the other side of the trail.

Carpenter and Carson tossed their remaining grenades over the side of the trail in the vicinity of the enemy movement.

"They're still coming!"

Ironhorse yelled, "Pull back! Pull back!  They're bringing the gunships closer.  Tighten the perimeter!"
The situation was deteriorating. Everyone was up in crouched positions, moving back toward Ironhorse, firing. Derriman stayed low, pushing up the hill, pulling his ruck with him.

A deafening explosion erupted.

Something slapped Derriman's fatigue pants, but didn't penetrate.

A large black cloud of smoke rolled over the top of the knoll, completely engulfing the Americans. Debris rained down for what seemed like minutes.

Groggily, Derriman turned over, looking over the perimeter. It couldn't be the same one. Seconds ago sixteen men stood, fighting for their lives, now there were none. Everyone was down. Nobody left upright.

He looked around again. *Dear God,* Derriman moaned to himself. *I'm the only one left. The only one?*

Ironhorse sat up, looking at Derriman. Pain was etched across the young captain's face. Carpenter sat up, pressing a dressing to a side wound. Behind the medic Sikes was pinned to a tree, dead. Horst sat up next to Ironhorse, helping Bacon, the RTO.

Ironhorse's gaze swept frantically over the area.

Thompson was folded over his rucksack, unmoving. With no head he wouldn't be moving again. Keiffer was lying on his back, his throat torn away. They watched the young man's blood spraying out over the jungle floor. There was fear in his pale blue eyes as he tried to roll over. They froze, only able to watch the last few seconds of his life drain away.

Derriman's mind went blank, no longer aware of what was going on around him. The next thing he knew Ironhorse was in his face. The sergeant couldn't make out what the captain was saying. Nothing made sense. Then he realized Ironhorse was too close. John Michael Derriman didn't like people yelling in his face.

Ironhorse's words broke through the trance. "Damn it, John, everybody's hit! Listen to me! Are you okay, can you walk?"

Derriman struggled back to reality. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay." He started to get up, but his right leg wouldn't hold him and he collapsed in a heap in front of Ironhorse.

He was stunned. He hadn't been hit. There was no pain. But his leg refused to work. Everything moved in slow motion. This wasn't happening. It came back to him. He had to be hit. Everyone was. No one was left to fight back. They were going to be overrun any minute.

Bacon was up, reporting the situation to Eckland. Derriman crawled over to him, gasping when he saw the wounds in the RTO's legs. Chunks of muscle as big as the sergeant's fist were missing. Bacon ignored the wounds, staying on the radio, but it was obvious that he was going into shock. Derriman and Horst slapped dressings on the wounds.

Then Derriman crawled off to help the others.

Horst waved him on. Like Bacon, he'd been hit everywhere, but he jacked another round into his pump shotgun, left-handed. Derriman couldn't understand why he didn't use both hands until he saw Horst's right wrist flopping back over his right forearm. "I'll make it, Sarge," the man said with a tight smile. "Go."

Michaelson was dead, pinned to a mahogany tree by the shrapnel that had killed him. Jones
lay face down, his back looking like raw hamburger. Derriman felt for a pulse. There wasn’t one. Garcia had been hit in the belly. Dead.

Carson signaled that he was okay. He turned back toward the trail, holding his M-16 at the ready.

Chang had a dime-sized hole just above his right ear. The exit wound at the top of his head was much larger. Without knowing why, Derriman felt for a pulse. There wasn’t one. Jakes lay on his side, right arm outstretched. His torn throat and chest had sprayed a fan-shaped pattern of blood around his body. Dead.

Then three bodies, nothing more than pieces…

Dead. Dead. Dead.

Six.

There were only six of them left.

Derriman crawled back to the center of the perimeter, tears blurring his vision. Ironhorse had penetration wounds in his lower back, thighs, and both hands. His legs worked, but he couldn’t hold anything.

If they didn't get help, none of them would survive.

"Chicken Coop," Ironhorse said, Carpenter holding the radio for him. "We need a dust-off. Where's the medevac?"

"Out ten, and closing, Little Fox. What the hell happened?"

"Unknown. We're down to six."

Derriman squeezed his eyes closed. Six. And all of them hit. They'd be hard pressed to throw up any kind of defense. They couldn't survive another attack. And it was coming. It had to be coming.

Minutes passed. Occasional shots buzzed through the trees.

"When are they coming?" Horst moaned.

Ironhorse shook his head. "They don't know how bad we're hit," he said roughly. "It'll keep 'em cautious."

"What the hell was that?" Carpenter asked.

The Cobras had been making a rocket run, but the destruction was much greater than an aerial rocket. The entire knoll was stripped of surface vegetation. The six looked up, seeing the medevac coming up on station. There was no trouble spotting them this time.

"Pull in!" Ironhorse called.

The six inched toward the center of the perimeter. Paul moved out, helping them in quicker. The roar became deafening. Above them a Huey with a bright red cross painted on its nose hovered less than a hundred feet up, a jungle penetrator slowly falling at the end of a steel cable.

"Here it comes!" Carson yelled.
The dust-off drifted, moving the penetrator away from the perimeter, toward the enemy positions. Derriman felt helpless. They could all hear rounds, hitting the chopper. The chopper was a fish in a barrel. The Cobras swooped in, trying to suppress the fire.

"We're gonna fuckin' die," Bacon moaned.

Derriman yelled, "Cap!" as Ironhorse sprang up, running down the hill after the penetrator — straight into enemy guns.

Ironhorse caught the penetrator less than twenty meters from NVA positions. Wrapping his arms around the steel shaft, he turned and ran back. He was almost there before the NVA realized what was going on. They took aim on Ironhorse. Carpenter fired past the staggering Cherokee.

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Derriman emptied a magazine down the hill as Ironhorse stumbled in with the penetrator, wrestling it over to the sergeant. Derriman held it upright while Paul dragged Bacon over and strapped him in.

Ironhorse stepped back, signaling the crew chief to pull up the slack. As the line tightened, Ironhorse’s expression turned to panic. The chopper had drifted and the penetrator was not centered. Bacon would be catapulted into the trees under the dust-off when the slack came out of the cable.

Ironhorse wrapped his arms around Bacon and the penetrator, lifting both clear of the ground and carrying his burden the necessary distance to center it under the chopper. Derriman’s mouth dropped open in wonder. A hero was earning his Medal of Honor right in front of his eyes.

Bacon was hoisted up and the chopper swung away, heading for the hospital.

Another dust-off was immediately on station, dropping another penetrator. NVA fire started again. They were after bigger game.

The chopper drifted, pulling the penetrator away again. Ironhorse shook his head, then chased down the hill after it.

The enemy was ready. Bullets snapped through the trees around Paul as he secured the penetrator and fought his way back up hill. He collapsed in front of Derriman, arms still wrapped around the rescue device.

"Horst… next," he gasped, struggling to his feet.

Seconds later Horst was on the medevac and on his way to help. Carpenter took over the radio.

"Cap!"

Ironhorse pressed his ear to the radio.

"Little Fox, more dust-offs on the way, but it's gonna be thirty minutes. I'm doing
everything I can. Hang on."

"Roger, Chick Coop, we'll give it our best."

Derriman wanted to cry. Four of them left. The concern in the CO's voice said it all – You're fucked.

The Cobras swung in, circling like angry hornets. They had no trouble marking the team's position now. Run after run followed, up and down the slopes ringing the perimeter.

Ironhorse knelt next to Derriman. "When they get back we get the wounded out, then the dead, then us. Agreed?"

Derriman nodded. He knew Ironhorse wasn't being noble. They were in the best shape so the job fell to them. They had come in together and by God they'd go out together.

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Each minute subtracted from the store of hope concerning their chances for survival. Nearly out of ammunition and grenades, all four men knew they couldn't last much longer.

It was getting late. They were surrounded by a bunch of pissed-off NVA. They had hurt them. The NVA wanted revenge.

Ironhorse and Derriman exchanged glances.

"If they breach the perimeter—"

"I'll take care of it, sir," Derriman said. He would, too. He'd shoot the survivors, then turn his weapon on himself. The prospect of being captured alive after killing four of the enemy nurses and a staff officer made the decision easy.

Paul nodded, then passed out the last of the ammo and grenades he'd managed to scavenge from the dead. There wasn't much.

"Cap," Carpenter whispered, passing over the radio receiver.

"Little Fox, this is Chicken Coop. I'm comin' in on a slick. Red Rooster is on the way. Hang tight. Help is on the way."

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Five minutes later they heard two choppers coming in fast. Cobras escorted the slicks into the LZ.

"Little Fox, Red Rooster is on the ground and on the way."

Enemy fire shifted direction, concentrating on the LZ. The NVA were wedged between them and Goldman's people.
"Chicken Coop, this is Little Fox. There are boogies between Red Rooster and the nest. Concentrate Cobras to the slope southwest of our perimeter."

"Roger, Little Fox."

The Cobras dropped like angry falcons, their miniguns raking the foliage. Enemy fire dropped off.

A few minutes later, American voices echoed down the slope. Ironhorse yelled, Derriman and Carpenter joining in. Carson was too weak.

NVA soldiers darted through the jungle, trying to escape the approaching soldiers and gunships. Fifteen to twenty meters away, the four survivors watched them turn, firing over their shoulders at Goldman's people. They held their fire, knowing they'd need whatever ammo they had left if the NVA decided to finish them on the way out.

"Little Fox! Little Fox!"

Ironhorse rolled. "Here! Keep coming! We're here!"

Goldman and his people swarmed over the four men, taking up defensive positions around the tiny perimeter.

"Medevac's on the way," Anderson said, his hand briefly squeezing Derriman's shoulder. "Five minutes out. Hang on!"

Derriman and Carpenter laughed silently, tears spilling over their cheeks. "Fuckin'-A, you say," the big black medic wheezed. "Fuckin'-A."

Goldman's medic worked over Carson. Ironhorse reached out, grabbing the man's sleeve. "Keep him alive."

"I will, Sir," the medic said, immediately returning to work.

"Paul?"

Ironhorse looked up. Goldman. "Thank you, Grandfather."

"Hang on, Paul. We're getting out of this."

Ironhorse nodded, dropping back against a ruck. The fear and anxiety built up over nine hours of continuous combat poured out in a stream of softly muttered profanity and tears. The sheer terror and hopelessness evaporated, leaving him empty and hollow.

The dust-offs arrived, Carson and Carpenter taken out.

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Twenty minutes passed before another medevac arrived for Derriman and Ironhorse. It was getting dark.

Paul motioned Goldman over. "Send us out together."
"It's too dangerous—"

"Staying here is dangerous. If it gets dark, you and your men are going to end up like us. Send us up together and get the fuck out of here."

Goldman thought a moment, then nodded.

They settled Derriman onto the penetrator, then aided Ironhorse to straddle the sergeant, his legs draped over Derriman’s.

Anderson ran up to Goldman. "Gotta hurry. The dust-off's takin' fire."

"Chicken Coop, this is Red Rooster, get those Cobras in here. The dust-off's taking fire!"

The Cobras screamed in. Derriman and Ironhorse rose out of the trees. Paul pulled the .45 from his waistband, holding it behind Derriman.

They looked down as they cleared the trees. The devastation was unbelievable. Dead NVA littered the perimeter. The jungle was torn apart. Huge holes of red earth pockmarked the slopes and valleys around the small knoll. The artillery barrages had landed much closer than they’d guessed.

Stripped trees stood like splintered telephone poles. The dense tropical forest that had greeted them now looked like the aftermath of a killer hurricane.

Hands appeared out of nowhere, reaching out for the two men, grabbing and pulling them into the safety of the chopper. Crewmen unhooked the rescue harness, and Derriman and Ironhorse lay back against the cabin wall as medics moved to treat their wounds.

Derriman looked at Ironhorse, an exhausted smile on his face. They'd made it. They would survive.

Their thoughts shifted to their dead comrades. Maybe they were safe now, too. Maybe they were free of pain, and death, and killing. Maybe they were the real survivors.

"Hey, Cap," Derriman called over the noise. "Some Italian said there's nine levels of Hell. How far do ya think we got today?"

"We were walking on the tenth level, Sergeant."

"Fuckin'-A."[1]

[1] Author’s Note: The sad part of this story? It is based on real events—events that were fictionalized here, but which did occur. Real men endured and died. Some facts were altered to fit this story; however, the source of the narrative comes from Gary A. Linderer's Black Berets
and Painted Faces. And by the by, the young Cherokee grunt (Billy Walkabout), who really did the things I credit here to Ironhorse did win a Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions. These were real heroes. I recycled their story because I felt that the spirit of their sacrifice was one that would be honored by association with Ironhorse as he is realized in the fan fiction. I do not mean to undercut the real sacrifices contained in this story, I honor them. May we never, never forget.

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