

## Where Did Hank Go

It was nearing the end of the monsoon season; the rice paddies were still a little muddy in places. We had all been working long hours with back-to-back night ambushes and a few day patrols thrown into the mix.

As the two squads were preparing for night ambushes, we had to listen to our point man Bruce Layman as he explained in detail about his R&R to Australia. I had been there a few months earlier and he was bringing back the memories. It was Bruce's way of rubbing it in, but now he was back and was facing the same old grind that he was doing before he left.

The top of the picnic table was covered with parts of M16 rifles, M79 grenade launcher , M60 machine gun, along with ammunition for all the weapons. Every day before a patrol departs for an ambush during the rainy season, and most of the time during the dry season, the equipment and ammo get cleaned and checked. Sometimes, a few of the guys would walk over to the range to test fire and zero in their weapon. The range was about 350 meters from our area, and we could hear someone checking his M16.

Some of the squad members had completed their equipment maintenance and had gone back to their areas to relax before dinner. I was just wiping the excess oil from my M79 when Lieutenant Mitchell came over to introduce me to the newest member of the patrol, Henry Doyle.

I was told Henry was joining my squad for this evening's night ambush and we should get better acquainted. Henry stood about six feet tall, a little on the heavy side, but if he were to remain with the patrol I'm sure he will be losing that weight within a few weeks. We exchange the usual formalities: where we were from back in the States; I ask him how long he had been in country, what unit had he come from before he volunteered for the Phu Loi Patrol. He said he was from Oakland, California, and he had been in country about four months. His unit was the 128<sup>th</sup> helicopter assault group.

Then I started with what was topmost on my mind. So, I asked Henry, "Tell me about your training and experience." He told me he preferred the name Hank, so I said, "Hank, it is." He told me he had some combat experience on the ground but most it was working as a gunner on a chopper, "I had to ask didn't you see enough action doing that?" Oh, he said that it has its moments, but he would rather take his chances on the ground. I told him I could understand that.

I said, "Welcome to the Phu Loi Patrol (Hell's Rangers)." I filled him in on who I was and what I expected of the men in my squad. I asked if his weapon and equipment were ready for the night ambush within the next two hours. He explained he had just checked his rifle on the range and needed to clean it. I could see were of the same mind. Then, I said, "Hank you can sit down at this picnic table and clean your rifle. How many magazines do you have?" I was told two.

Then he asked. "Where do I get the rest of what I need to be carried on an ambush?" I told him I would help him with the rest of his gear after chow. "It's about twenty minutes before the mess hall opens, so once your weapon is clean and your magazines have a light coat of oil on them, it will be about time to eat."

I asked, "Do you have a bunk and an area in the billet for your things?" He said he was set. I said, "I will stop by in about twenty five minutes and we could try some of the food in the mess hall. Oh, by the way, only put eighteen rounds in each magazine twenty rounds will sometimes cause the M16 to jam."

It was about 5:00 pm, so I walked over to see if Hank was ready. I found him setting on the edge of his bunk smoking a butt and talking with George, another member of the squad. George's home was from somewhere in northern California. "I'm glad to see you two found each other. Let's go get something to eat."

After we ate, we walked the road back to our area, as the shortcut across the field was still pretty much a bog. I was not eager to get my feet soaked any quicker than I needed to. A few more weeks and we will be into the dry season. My favorite time of the year is the transition from wet to dry.

I walked Hank over to our ammo bunker, as I took the key from my pocket and opened it. I said, "Hank do you have any hand grenades;" He said, "Nope." I gave him two. "How about smoke grenades?" Again, the same answer. I said, "You had better take eighteen more magazines for your M16; in the box on the lower shelf you will find the ammo. You should be glad you are not carrying the M14 like I was when I joined the patrol; that was something else to carry. Let's see, all you need now are two claymore mines; you will need two belts of M60 ammo (200 rounds); and whatever you want to carry for food and water."

"It's 6:05 now. Be ready to be on the truck at 7:00 sharp. We have two patrols going out tonight in different areas; we are heading east of the main gate and the other patrol will be setting up north of the base near the ravine. Let's hope we don't get into trouble tonight as we have no backup."

I spent the next fifteen minutes talking to our platoon leader, Captain Hitchcock, about our new man, and the remaining time reading a book. Hank was getting his gear ready and talking to George about the type of patrols and ambushes we went on. He was trying to fit all the potential problems into this first mission. Really not much different than the rest of us, only we had more experience to draw from.

It was 7:00 PM and we were loaded on the truck and a half, and soon were heading for the base command center to get our last minute information before we departed the base. There, the squad leaders would study the board to check out where all the friendlies (allies) were. We would also see what we would have for artillery, both high explosive and illumination, and explain to the Officer of the Day which route we planned on taking to move into the ambush positions.

Steve, the other squad leader and I, got into the truck and drove along the northern perimeter road. It was getting dark so we had to use our blackout light. These are like parking lights; they keep the bunkers from being lit up, and the truck is more difficult to see from unwanted eyes. The first patrol of five members jumped off the truck at bunker # 26 and the truck continued south for about a mile toward the main gate. We were on our way; I was wondering what was going in Hank's mind as we neared the gate. He had not spoken to anyone since we got on the truck back at the unit area. We were about to

step into the world on the other side of the perimeter fence. This is a place where the only ones moving in the night were we and the enemy.

As the truck turned and was heading back to our area where we lived, I ask the question I ask most of the time, "Anyone have any last questions while we can still talk out loud about them?" Most of the time, not much gets said other than a few rude remarks or Mc Johnson might have a joke to tell us. I could understand where he got his sense of humor, just look at his last name. It was 7:55 PM.

"Okay, let's head out." Just as we were leaving the gate Mc Johnson pipes up and said, "Remember! Only you can prevent forest fires." That did it; we were all laughing so hard we had to go back in again to settle down. It helped relieve the tension; I knew Hank must have felt some relief at that point. Either that or he would be scared out of his mind, having to spend the ambush with Leroy Mc Johnson.

We soon settled down again and were on our way. We were a team of six tonight. Hank, being out for the first time, would not get involved much with the interaction of the squad; he would remain close to me until we had the opportunity to see how he would do when we met a challenge. We walked single file along the road east past the first village to our right and turned south before we got to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) compound. We were spaced far enough to see the person to our front. As we passed the rubber tree plantation to our left, Bruce, our point man, stopped the squad long enough to take a long look around. This is the area we have had a lot of activity lately. From here to the ambush site, we really had to stay on our toes. Bruce would stop every few minutes to look things over. We have been followed more than once. We were about to start into the brush; there, we will need to group up some in order see the person to our front.

I remember one night our point man stopped to take a quick look around, and proceeded to continue on his way; one of the guys thought it would be a good time to retie his boot. When he looked up, the first three members of the squad were gone, leaving him and one other by themselves in the middle of the night on a trail in the brush. Okay, what do you do? Try to catch up, and take a chance the guy you find won't shoot you. On the other hand, do you sit tight and wait for the squad to find you, hoping it is the rest of the squad and not the enemy. It also is pretty nerve racking for the ones returning for the remaining of the squad. What if too much time goes by and they can't find you? You will need to spend the time alone without a radio or much protection.

We worked our way through the brush and out into the fields, they were muddy but not full of puddles. We were heading to an area were I thought we could set up and remain dry, if it didn't rain. As we passed the area where the villagers retrieved clay for making pottery and the brick factory, they would dig holes as deep as twenty feet deep and haul the material up with a bucket. Later these holes were used as water storage wells.

I remember the last time I was out here we sprang an ambush on a small groups of Viet Cong bringing in supplies. We almost got caught by them as they were walking along a trail we had set to close to the trail for our ambush. We took no injuries and none of the enemy got away, to my knowledge. I think they were high on grass.

I saw the place we were going to set up in our ambush position; it was in an area of rice paddies where two trails intersected. I chose to seek shelter behind a paddy dike that

was close enough to the trail to set the claymores for the first offensive position. We would place four more to our rear, just in case someone tries to sneak up behind us.

It was now 9:45 PM, there were no stars or moon; the cloud cover was heavy with a feeling of moisture in the air. This morning, we had a half moon and it came up about 3:15 AM which means it will be nearly 4:00 AM when it comes up in tomorrow. I don't like breaking the ambush when the moon is greater than half full. The less light at night the better the conditions are of not being detected. I don't want the enemy to know where we set up our ambushes.

I did not like where we needed to set our ambush tonight. It was a long way out and a lot of risky areas to go through get back to the base, and we had no back up. Sometimes, the feeling sits down on you and you need to stay extra alert. I had such a feeling on this night. Maybe it was just because we had the new guy.

Tonight, we were six in the squad; I always feel better with six, but no more than seven. It's more difficult to control the ambush and we are easier to be spotted with more in the squad. Because of the area and the distance from our base, I had each guy place both of his claymores, giving us a total of twelve for our first line of defense, if we needed them. It was very dark in this area for being as open as it was. The tree line was about 300 meters behind us and we were at the top of a little rise. The trails intersected about thirty meters to our front.

The squad was set up one rice paddy back from the intersection of two trails. This way we would have some protection of the two foot paddy dike if the enemy should engage us in a fire fight. We were set in a corner of the paddy along two perpendicular sides the M60 man was in the corner, next to him on either side was a rifleman; one of them was Hank, the other was my RTO. I was the last one to the left with my M79, and on the other far end was another rifleman.

We had seven of the twelve claymores out. Hank was going out to the rear with his second one; I was feeling better about him, he seemed to be a natural at this. George was watching Hank as he was about to place the claymore when suddenly he disappeared. George thought he must have slipped in the mud, but Hank did not get backup. George signaled me that something was wrong. The others were on alert as well. I sent George and Mc Johnson to see what happened. Within a minute Leroy came back. He told me that Hank had fallen into a well.

Never in my wildest thoughts would I have imagined that to happen. I told Mc Johnson to stay with the squad, I ran over to the hole. I got my flashlight and shined it down. There was Hank about ten feet below me standing in mud with water up to his knees. I ask, "Are you hurt?" He told me that he thought he was ok. I was thinking that part's good. Hank said, "My feet are stuck to the bottom, it must be clay." My first thought was to tie all our towels together and see if he could pull himself loose from the clay, then he could climb out using the towels. It was 10:00 PM.

By the time we had all the towels tied together, it measured about six feet, still a few feet short. Bruce, Leroy, and George volunteered their shirts and we tied them to our towels. It was long enough but when we tried to pull him up, one of the shirts sleeves ripped off, and his feet remained stuck to the bottom. I told George to remain with Hank, being they were both from California; they would have something in common to talk about. The

three men who gave up their shirts for the cause put them back on again Bruce was missing one sleeve. I was planning our next move.

I left my flashlight with George while Leroy, Bruce and I went back to our ambush positions. I radioed the command center to explain what had happened. I need a rope; could someone send it by chopper. I might need to get a hurt man back to the base. I was told, "Wait a few minutes, I'll get back to you."

The wind came up out of the south and now the rain started; it was not a light shower and visibility was poor; I thought, what else could go wrong? I was thinking about poor Hank at the bottom of the well: he was with a squad of men he did not know; he was not sure where he was; it was in the middle of the night, in an area where his enemy could engage the patrol without warning and his feet were stuck to the clay in the bottom of a well. I made sure someone was with Hank with a light on him at all times.

The radio crackled and the duty officer called "Alpha 2, this is Comanche 1." I answered. He told me because of the heavy rain in the area, the visibility would be too poor and the helicopter assist could not get to us until the weather cleared some. I asked if any other patrols in our area could help. Again the answer was not in our favor. I had no choice: we could not free Hank with what we had among us; no chopper would be able to fly out and there were no patrols near enough to get to us in a reasonable length of time.

Hank was wet and getting cold, we had nothing else we could do; we had to get the rope ourselves. The next decision I had to make I did not take lightly. Should I leave George with Hank and return to the base with a light four man squad to get the rope or leave Hank in the dark at the bottom of the well, his feet buried in muck with water up to his knees, by himself until we return.

This patrol was further out than what we normally would go and we had to travel through a high-risk area twice before we got back to Hank with a rope. If we met with an enemy ambush with that light of a patrol, we most likely would get the worst of it, and when Hank's legs gave out he would be up to his arm pits in water before anyone got to him. To leave George to keep watch while we were away would do no good if the enemy were to find them; he would not even have a radio to call for support if they needed it.

As much as I disliked the idea, I chose to leave Hank on his own until we came back to rescue him. The trip to the base and back would take at least two hours if all went well. With some luck the weather might clear enough to get a chopper to assist us. That would shorten our time by at least an hour.

I told the guys to saddle up; we were going back to get the rope. I put on all my gear and went over to the well. George was talking to Hank in a low voice reassuring him we have a plan to get him out. Little did George really know what the plan was until I laid down beside him to explain what we were going to do.

I sent George back to the others to gather his things so we could be on our way. I told Hank he was going to have to remain calm until we returned, and I gave him a quick reason for us leaving him by himself for about 2.5 hours. He needed to continue to stand until we return for if he were to sit he most likely would not be able to stand without help. I asked if he had a watch. He told me he did. I tried to assure him we would return as soon as possible. If the weather cleared some, we would get a chopper to

speed things along. I didn't ask him how he was doing as; I didn't want to hear it. Besides, I know how I would be feeling if I were he. I told him just keep his mind on pleasant things back home and how someday he will have this story to tell his children and grandchildren. With that I left.

The squad was ready; I told the point man we were not to go back the way we came in as we could walk into a waiting ambush in a number of likely places. He told me he had planned to head north and go between the brick factory and the village by the main road; it was a good plan. I also told him to be as careful and move as quickly as possible. I'm sure we all had the same thoughts. Every man in the squad owned a part of that black wet hole in the ground.

We started out single file: Bruce Layman, on point, with his M16 and a starlight scope, followed by George Trick with the M60, then me with the M79, my RTO Jeff Thompson with his rifle and, bringing up the rear, was Leroy Mc Johnson. Tonight, he was carrying the BAR (30 cal. Browning automatic rifle); he also carried 20 magazines for the weapon.

The route we took back had many places to be ambushed from; I know because I have set many ambushes up in these areas. We needed to cross through two cemeteries, a ravine, within 200 meters of a village and about 400 meters of the brick factory, before getting with in sight of the main gate, a distance of about 1.5 miles of open rice paddies. I'm glad it was raining hard; it gave us sight and sound cover and the Viet Cong like to stay dry and warm if they can.

I radioed in to the command center and told the duty officer we were with in sight of the main gate and I would hold our position until he confirmed the bunker line knew we were about to come up to the road and enter the base. We made the trip in 45 minutes. I checked my watch it was 11:20 Hank had been in that black wet well for nearly 1.5 hours. The duty officer called me back to let me know the bunkers will hold fire and the truck was waiting at the gate. I saw the truck and a small group of men standing beside it. I wondered where they came from!

As we were nearing the truck, I realized that six of the MP's volunteered to join the patrol for this mission. They were fully armed with M16's and ammo, enough for a firefight if needed; they also brought thirty feet of rope and a new shirt for Bruce. The rope we could also use as a stretcher when we all took a hold of it to make a place for Hank to lie on if he needed it.

I gave the new members of the patrol a quick briefing, and asked for questions. Bruce wanted to know what route we were taking back. Normally, we would not take the same route to return for fear of someone following us; but this time I told Bruce go back the way we came. It was the fastest way back; we most likely were not followed as we were returning to the base and we now had six more men. We set out single file with the MP's intermixed with our original squad. We now had a very strong team of eleven.

The rain was still falling, but had let up some. We traveled faster and stopped less to check out the area as we moved toward the well. I was very grateful for the added men; it was really making a big difference. We went through the first graveyard and were about to start into the ravine where brush was thicker; I noticed we were getting spread

out too far from one another. Bruce stopped to check out the ravine with the starlight scope. I sent word to hold until we closed spacing some; the rest of the squad knew what to do. It was now midnight. Hank had been in the well for two hours and by himself for about an hour and a half.

When we got back to the area, the trails were hard to find due to the heavy rain but within a few minutes, we located the intersection about 300 meters from the tree line and the village. I deployed seven members of the squad into an ambush position about twenty five meters out from the well, and the rest of us would get Hank out.

George and I went to the well; Hank was sure glad to see us. He had fallen in the well about 10:00 it was now 12:30 AM. He was tired and shivering cold and I'm sure plenty worried. God knows I would have been. I told him that it won't be long now as we brought six additional men back with us. He couldn't speak to us as his jaw was shaking so hard he would have bitten his tongue. I ask him to clear his weapon then tie it and any loose equipment to the rope so we can pull it up. This he did with great effort and loose knots. I managed to get it pulled out of the well without anything dropping. George was already lowering the other end of the rope to Hank so he could tie it around his chest. I ask, "Do you think you can secure the rope tight enough for us to pull your feet loose from the muck?" He nodded his head yes.

We pulled as hard as we could but his feet would not break loose; he needed help. George was thinking ahead of me; he had already untied Hank's equipment and had taken his own gear off. He was tying the loose end of the rope around his chest. It looked like we needed to lower George in to assist Hank. Hank had gotten too weak in the two and one half hours of shivering to any longer help himself. I told him to untie his end of the rope; we needed the slack to lower George down to assist him. It would be a tight squeeze to have two men in a four and one half foot diameter well trying to get Hank's feet free of the muck.

George was standing with his back to the well as we braced ourselves to take George's weight. We have done this many times checking out tunnels during the daylight, but never at night. George stepped back and walked down the inside of the black hole. We felt the rope slack and we knew George succeeded in getting to the bottom. With only a foot or so to work George managed to free Hank's feet, get untied and tie the rope around Hank's chest. As one of the outers pulled up the remaining rope, I asked George how it was going. He said, "It was all we could do to pull his feet loose, but he was good to pull up."

Hank was not able to help much with his extraction from the deep. We more or less dragged him up the clay side of the well. When his head cleared the top, Eric, one of the MP's, grabbed his belt and wrestled him over the edge like he was apprehending a criminal. We got him standing and wrapped with a poncho to shelter him from the wind. It was now 1:15 am. He had stayed in the well for over 3 hours and most of the time he was alone. I asked if he was able to walk. He had not tried yet but he thought his left ankle was hurt. He tried and found he was not able to put pressure on it.

The question is should we try and get him back now or would it be best to wait until morning. I thought the risk was too great to carry him back in the dark and wet. We had enough men and fire power to keep most anyone away who chose to take us on. I called back to the command center to give the duty officer our situation report (sit rep). I asked

again about the chopper and got the same reply, not until daylight. If we had to wait until daylight we had to get Hank warmed up. He might not make it for four hours.

I talked it over with squad they saw things the same as I. I decided to deploy the squad into a defensive ambush; I wonder if that one's in the book. We played out our claymores again. Hank was making so much noise with his shivering and shaking, I'm sure he was keeping the people in the village awake some 300 meters away. It was no secret who we were and now where we were. I'm surprised they had not been lined up by their huts selling balloons and cotton candy as they watched the parade go by every hour or so. If we did not get ambushed in the next hour, I had a plan to have old Hank warmed up quickly.

It was 2:30 AM, and Hank was getting far worse. I asked Jeff and Leroy each to bring in one of their claymores. They looked at me as though I had stripped a gear. Jeff had to ask "Why?" Considering the request I made I felt I owed them an explanation. I said, "Hank's too cold, we need to warm him up."

Claymore mines contain a high explosive (C4) that propels hundreds of stainless steel ball bearing about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in diameter about 35 meters to their front. This explosive is set off with a blasting cap connected to an electrical device. However, C4 will burn white hot if you were to hold a match to it and will not explode unless someone sets a charge off in it.

Everyone knew the plan and they knew the risk, but we all were willing to take it. It was the only way we had to warm Hank up in the field. Leroy took out his survival knife and broke open his claymore took out a piece of the white putty explosive and lit it on fire with his lighter. You would have thought the sun came up in the center of this muddy rice paddy. Once it's lit, it burns with a flame I don't think you could put out unless you took away all the oxygen.

Most of the guys had gotten down behind the far rice paddy dike away from the flame. They had to keep out of sight and protect their night vision. Both Jeff and Leroy stayed with Hank and fed the fire with pieces of C4 to keep Hank warm. Anyone in the area that saw the fire must have thought we were having a bonfire. The villagers were most likely talking about the nighttime entertainment we provided for weeks.

I stayed in contact with the command center as usual for the next few hours. That was the only normal thing that happened on the patrol during this ambush setup. They did not know about the warming fire. At 5:45 AM I got the call that the dust off was coming for Hank.

The fire had been out for the last two hours and we looked for the most part like a real ambush patrol again. The Medivac pilot radioed me for my location; I told him I had popped smoke. He said, "I see green smoke." I said, "Correct, set down twenty meters to the south. We have your patient ready to transport." The chopper sat down near our green smoke at 5:55 AM. We loaded Hank into the chopper as Mc Johnson said something about Hank was as cold as a well digger's something or other; that got us all laughing as Hank was carried away.

He had a quick flight to the air field and a stop at the local field hospital to see the doctor and Hank was patched up. He had suffered a badly sprained left ankle, a sprained right wrist and a mild case of hypothermia. I had to look that word up.

When he got back to our area, I gave the real report to the Captain. He gave me a verbal reprimand, than slapped me on the back and said that took guts, good job.