

A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

Everyone who served in Viet Nam holds a memory of one particular building or another that somehow ranked above all the others he experienced during his time "in-country." For some vets it is a battalion aid station, for others a barracks or tent that they called home, for a few of us it is some commonplace structure that, within the context of its environment, was remarkable. During my second tour in Viet Nam that building was the crapper at Patrol Base Carol.

Located at the tip of a peninsula jutting into one of the largest lakes in South Viet Nam Patrol Base Carol was a tiny outpost manned by a single under-strength platoon augmented by a mortar squad. Isolated from the nearest friendly firebase by several miles there were few amenities other than those built by the small force that seized and occupied the site. A single cordon of stacked concertina held in place by evenly spaced six-foot steel stakes marked the perimeter. A few yards behind the wire stood four fighting bunkers, an 81 mm mortar mounted in a modified armored personnel carrier, and ten rifle pits. A few steps behind each fighting position sandbagged sleeping shelters provided a secondary line of defense. At the center of the compound was a run-down Buddhist shrine that served as the command post. On the eastern side of the perimeter stood the P.O.L. point, a couple of "Australian Shower" buckets hanging from a tree and indisputably the finest field sanitation facility in Binh Dinh Province.



Unlike the rest of the filthy outhouses that served the needs of American forces during the war, this particular three-foot-square, seven-foot-tall building was clean, airy, and purpose-built. Lumber, nails and hardware salvaged from Bangalore torpedo boxes and mortar ammunition crates framed the structure leaving wide spaces between the four corner posts. Green burlap screens made from sandbags with the stitching removed were carefully fastened inside with strips of lumber sized to match the interior dimensions of the corner posts, creating double windows that spanned the area between the "modesty panel" above the seating platform and the sloped boards that supported the roof. A rectangle of rubberized material cut from a ruined rain poncho waterproofed the roof. The door, supported by a half-dozen hinges carefully removed from three 81 mm ammunition crates, featured screens that aligned with those on the back and sides of the structure, providing flow through ventilation, and admitting enough light to permit reading during daylight hours. A one slot magazine rack, shielded from the elements by another scrap of poncho, was fastened to the modesty panel on the right. The clever design usually held recent issues of The Stars and Stripes and the 173rd Airborne's weekly newspaper. On the opposite wall an equally ingenious enclosure kept the toilet paper dry. A compartment beneath the fully-enclosed seating platform held the bottom third of a 55-gallon drum, severed from the rest of the container with just the right amount of det cord, an explosive that looks like plastic clothes line. The cess pot was mottled with bum scars from the daily chore that entailed lifting the top-hinged door at the rear, pulling the smelly vessel to a designated spot, adding a gallon of diesel fuel, and burning the mixture to a relatively sterile lump. When the pot cooled it was re-inserted into its compartment. In addition to all of these features the crapper had one crowning touch: it sported a real, stateside-quality deluxe toilet seat, complete with lid. While the crapper at Patrol Base Carol might not have been quite as splendid as the legendary "Brick Outhouse" its name and innovative features paid homage to the equally legendary Thomas Crapper, the nineteenth century London plumber whose patented toilet claimed a certain flush with an easy pull.