

# Burning Shit Was a Shitty Job



By James R. Teller

In the field we pretty much took a dump when and where we wanted. It was no big deal. But, in the rear we'd go to the latrine and instead of digging holes what they would do was to take fifty five gallon drums and cut them in half. Then they would slide these under the latrine's seats from the back. They would have twice as many cut down drums as they had latrine holes, so that the drums that had been used could be pulled out and replaced with empty ones. The used ones would then be placed together and if there were enough some would be stacked on top of each other. Diesel fuel would be poured into the drums and set afire and the shit burning detail would stir the burning diesel fuel and shit until it was all gone. This is the way most of the latrines in Vietnam were constructed unless of course you had running water and a sewer, which was pretty much unheard of in I Corp. No, I don't think I ever heard of it in I Corp but stranger things have happened.

So when Alpha Company came in to a fire base one of the jobs assigned to us would be to burn shit. At the base camps civilians or the local VC would be hired to burn shit. But, with that exception the job was reserved for newbie's, someone who was need of punishment or just someone who got the shitty end of the stick. It was a shitty job. The diesel fuel and shit made a black smoke which would cling to the clothes of the shit detail and form a dark oily film on their skin. The smell of course would gag a maggot and the shit detail never had much of an appetite during their work day.

One time in the rear area at Duc Pho I headed to the latrine to take care of my business. I noticed that the Vietnamese whose job it was to burn shit was not only busy burning shit but was also using the fire to heat a can of C Rations. I went inside and had to decide which end needed attention first. Like I said burning

shit is a shitty job but I suppose it had its positive side too.

Anyway we'd been out for a while and it seemed to me that every time I told the squad to do something there was complaining and griping, bitching and moaning. When we finally got to a fire base the bunker I occupied was so hard to defend it had a forty pound carter charge buried in the floor, to be used if we were over run. It had been placed there by someone else but we checked it out and decided to leave it in place. Instead of burying more carter charges we decided to string wire in the ravine in front of us and have the engineers come in and place mines in front of the bunker. These work details although necessary and a lot easier than humping the bush still brought more complaining and griping, bitching and moaning. Frankly, I had had enough.

So, in the morning when Charles Turner my Fire Team Leader came to me and asked who

would be doing what as far as details for the day were concerned I assigned everyone in the squad to do something except for Turner and myself. Turner was a top hand; a first rate machine gunner and a trusted team leader who could always be counted on. Today, however I would be asking him to do something he was going to have trouble choking down. “What are you and I going to do?” Turner asked.

“We’re going to stay in and burn shit;” I responded. “Don’t say anything to the squad. I’ve had a stomach full of them.”

Turner didn’t hesitate or protest in any way. I knew he wouldn’t not because he was afraid of me but because if I was going to burn shit and I asked him to help he would because I had earned his respect somewhere along the way and like I said he was a top hand and you can’t be a top hand complaining and griping, bitching and moaning. Abuse the trust that he gave and he could be your worst enemy.

Besides, I wasn’t doing this to punish him. I was doing this to punish the squad, in a strange

and odd way that only the men of the infantry will understand.

Turner assigned the squad their details and they grumbled their way out through the wire. Then he and I headed for the latrine where our day's work awaited. We burned shit that whole morning and when the squad came in for lunch break we didn't stop because we weren't going to eat anyway. We ignored them and went about our business as if they weren't there. Shortly after they went back out to string wire we finished our work detail, found a water trailer and using our helmets gave each other a shower by pouring water on each other. We then returned to the shade of the bunker where we settled in for a little siesta and waited for the evening meal.

I was awakened by the sound of Turner talking loudly to the squad. "Hell; Turner said; "Sarge don't even want to talk to you belly aching bastards. It's easier for him and me to

just do it ourselves. The bottom line is we really don't need or want your sorry asses. Teller can take point and I've got the gun. What else do we need"? With that Turner gave me a shake and said; "Come on Teller, let's go get in the chow line."

I and Turner ignored the squad the rest of that day but we noticed a change in attitude and the next morning the whole squad went out to string wire. All of a sudden no one had it so bad, there wasn't any complaining and everyone was sort of in a happy mood. We enjoyed the day and although we never sat down and talked about it I think the squad was embarrassed to have their Squad Leader and Fire Team Leader burning shit when all they'd been asked to do was string a little wire. Like I said earlier it was kind of an Infantry thing and you'd probably have to be a grunt to fully understand it. Grunts, well they're on the bottom of the pile so to speak because everyone has it better or easier than they do but they take a lot of pride in who

and what they are and everyone wants to be respected and what kind of respect does a Squad Leader have for his men when he goes and burns shit instead of having them do it. It was a day well spent and forty years later Charles Turner still remembers the day he and I spent burning shit.