

The Dilemma

by

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The average age of the US soldier in Viet Nam was something on the order of 23.11 years old. In 1968, at the height of the American buildup of combat power, more than 540,000 of us US soldiers were on the ground. J. D. Salinger had introduced many of my peers to the act of masturbation in his 1953 novel *Catcher in the Rye*. As Holden Caulfield struggled with his guilt, from lifting his own collective on occasion, we all struggled with a greater problem; staying alive!

Now the act of masturbation wasn't new or unique to the U.S. Army; they invented it. They had done a neat job of classifying the act itself into three distinct categories 1) Mental 2) Operational and 3) Perverse.

Mental masturbation was practiced by the Drill Instructors that greeted the bus when you all arrived a Ft. Polk, LA at 11:40 PM on a February evening. A big black guy, that looked like Smokey Bear, yelled at you while you stood in the parking lot until 03:15 AM the next morning covering down a number painted on the asphalt before you could finally go to bed.

Operational masturbation was more complex. A good example would be when the troop saddled up nearly 30 helicopters and you all rode out across the jungle to a set of coordinates where some spook in a U-8 said an NVA headquarters was located. Upon your glorious arrival, all you found was maybe a few monkeys and more jungle. It was a lot like kissing your sister; it felt good while you were doing it, but when it was over, you weren't proud of it.

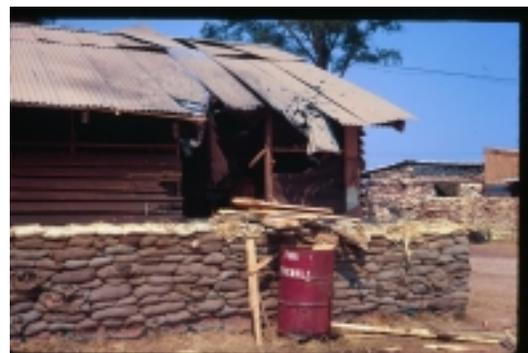
Now there was Perverse or the real deal when you actually rapped on your own throttle while thinking about that girl back home or the latest Playboy centerfold.

Trying to find a private place, if one was so inclined, while living in Phouc Vinh was a bitch. Over two hundred guys were your constant companions and privacy was at a premium. I had heard, from the *Big Boys*, that the Officers Shower late in the evenings was a place of such solitude.



Officers Shower – Phouc Vinh RVN- 1968

On this particular evening, I had entered the shower very late, had just soaped up, and was staring out over the screened slit when the first Katyusha 107 mm rocket slammed into the compound. Now here's where the dilemma came in. Do I raise my wet and soapy ass off of the slimy floor where who had been doing God knows what with themselves and run for the bunker or stay low and hope the NVA didn't value the shower as a high priority target?



107 mm Urban Renewal – 1Lt Ungaros Room – Phouc Vinh 1969

I stayed low and slithered around on that nasty floor but considering the alternatives came out just fine with no apparent ill effects.