

## The Great Toilet Paper Conspiracy by Ken McElroy

In the summer and fall of 1970, a fiendish assault on the morale of Americans in Vietnam's IV Corps occurred, "the great toilet paper shortage". I know this shortage was rampant in Vinh Long and Can Tho but I would like for readers who remember this barbarous affair in other areas to report where and for how long they suffered so the full extent of this debacle can be documented.

How it started was unknown, all we knew was that toilet paper became extremely scarce. Supply officers were unable to receive toilet paper through official channels and the PX had also run out of this commodity. The Vietnamese didn't use American type toilet paper so it could not be purchased in any of the IV Corp cities. Before it ended, GIs were even asking their folks to send this item in their next care packages.

At first, the shortage was thought to be only a temporary event. People with rolls of toilet paper in their hootches (for whatever reason) were originally willing to share their resources until they began to notice the length of the shortage. Once it was apparent that a crisis was at hand, resources were kept under lock and key and were rarely shared even with bunk buddies.

Newspapers were the first option to replace toilet paper. This included the Stars and Stripes or any newspaper sent from home. Some people preferred to tear the newspaper sheets into strips and other people preferred to tear the sheets into squares. The size of the newspaper sheet had to be taken into account for either of these approaches. People waited at the PX for any new issue of newspapers, not to read, but hoard. I noticed that the National Enquirer was the last newspaper to disappear.

The next source of paper became paperback books. Most units got monthly boxes of paperbacks from the States for the troops to read. These books became the backbone of a free rotating library in most units. Although these book pages were passable for daily functions, their shortcomings became apparent with outbreaks of diarrhea. Few people were professed to being desperate enough to appropriate books from the base library, but it was noticed that several volumes disappeared during this period. There was even discussion of consuming the hymnals in the chapel but our two "sky pilots" kept a sharp watch on their tomes.

In Vietnam, the only real American money was pennies and twenty dollar bills (higher denominations of bills might have been available but I didn't run in those circles). The common coinage between the penny and the twenty dollar bill was filled with military script issued in the common monetary denominations. The attached picture shows several versions of the 10 cent notes that were issued over the years. I believe that the submarine was the actual script used during this period. Lower denominations of currency were more widely circulated and the constant handling of these lower value notes had made them more acceptable for use during this paper shortage. Thus, nickels were the first to be used. People justified using the paper currency with comments like "It's just another form of a pay toilet".

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As the crisis continued, dimes, quarters, half dollars, and even dollars had to be used. This had two effects. First, the local economy began to dry up as people no longer had spending money. Second, constipation began to set in as people hated to use the higher denominations. I did notice that the Vietnamese “manure burners” started paying enthusiastic attention to the manure each day. Their observed exertions gave a new meaning to the term “Money Laundering”.

Just as dollars were becoming standard bathroom paper, toilet paper suddenly reappeared in abundant quantities. As soon as everyone could squirrel away a roll or two for future emergencies, the local economy began to recover.

I heard that there was a humorous story in the Stars and Stripes newspaper about some unit in I Corp receiving two huge truckloads of toilet paper when they had ordered two cases. That was scant humor if there really was such a story but during this period the Stars and Stripes was too valuable to read so I must have missed that particular article.