

THE BUSH HAT

Its tattered, torn, scared and sometimes burnt. It's always stained with juices from the last few meals, along with grease, oil, dirt and sweat.

It's supposed to be green but this varies depending on age, use and imagination of the owner.

I've seen them covered with names of loved ones, numbers representing months to go, safety pins, grenade pins and even lucky charms.

It's designed to shade the eyes and neck from direct sunlight however, with ingenuity it is used by those with experience for numerous other tasks.

For instance, what flannel could soak up sweat, wipe the face of dirt and grime; what serviette could soak up spilt tea or soup better; what oven glove could hold a steel mug of steaming coffee or a hot can of luncheon meat; what pillow can give more restful sleep for a weary head and what rag could clean a rifle, boots or even a dusty seat, better.

Although it's made in the same factory with thousands of others, the final process consists of a heavy grinding, smashing and crumpling machine that makes each one a different shape, so that you never see any two alike.

Each one has its own personality, and somehow adopts the personality of the owner.

The styles reflected vary from cowboy, with the sides turned up; Mexican, with the front and back turned up; and Napoleon, with three sides turned up. Now and again you see one with no sides turned up and wonder what kind of person the wearer must be. Very conservative or perhaps, just wanting to make a statement?

If you pick it up by the crown and place it flat on your head you still never get two that look alike. Some diggers can even spin it on one finger, fling it into the air, still spinning, so that falls `flop` onto the owners head and there it sits, comfortable, casual, but with a `couldn't care less` attitude that just demands respect.

To own a new one is very embarrassing and you feel like a new boy at school. At nights you soak it in dirty water, stamp on it and roll it around on the floor, hoping that this will bring some respectability. But to no avail. Then all of a sudden (you can never predict just when) it at last becomes the smelly, dirty, priceless article you've always longed for.

Sadness is losing your old faithful. One that's been through it all with you, one that's become as close to you as your rifle and sweat rag. Soldiers don't cry very often but it's too much when you lose your bush hat utter sadness, hopelessness and humiliation.

One couldn't wish for a better fate to one's bush hat than to lose it in the heat of battle. To know that somewhere, in some corner of a paddy field, perhaps tangled up in bamboo, lies your bush hat.

One more casualty of this filthy war. Is it possible to feel love for a piece of cloth? Well whatever it is, I feel very close to that tattered, smelly shape that lays in the dirt before me.