

People By Wally Traling



Salesman In Saigon

You've heard about those Mexican mushrooms producing strange imaginative illusions in the mind.

Well, here's a true tale without mushrooms.

It's better.

Tom Devine, 37, was a waiter at the Dream Inn, March, 1964, and served a group from EBSCO. This means the Elton B. Stephens company, a firm which, among other things, sells recreational and service club equipment to military installations.

Devine struck up a conversation and something clicked on both sides.

He was hired, given two and a half days orientation at the EBSCO Santa Cruz branch, 940 41st avenue, and WHAM — shipped off to Viet Nam.

The first year he ran up a sales total of \$220,000, flabbergasting his bosses, breaking records hither and yon. So far this year he has beaten his old record by \$30,000.

So we know that in Viet Nam, where angels fear to tread, business is good.

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But Devine, a University of Minnesota sociology graduate, is only human.

"When I arrived in Saigon I checked into a hotel and stayed there three days unnerving myself. On the ship coming over I couldn't convince anyone I was a salesman heading for Viet Nam. I had to be either FBI or CID," he said.

For an office he rented a house for \$110 a month with a phone. He enclosed a garage in front for additional space and to ward off Viet Cong tax collectors in Saigon.

His maid, whom he pays \$22 a month, was approached by a "collector" whom she recognized as a Viet Cong, and paid him money. The office boy also was approached and paid \$8. Devine was not home either time.

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He travels throughout South Viet Nam selling equipment for day rooms at the front and clubs in cities.

"In Saigon you have the feeling that something is always ready to break loose. A backfiring auto makes you jump inside," he said.

He was across the street from the Caravelle hotel when a bomb blew out the fifth floor. Tore his pants running for cover.

His quarters were damaged by the officers' club bombing last Christmas.

"There's sort of a philosophy here. Those who were killed by Viet Cong bombs were in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said.

"But I usually eat in restaurants. I pay \$1.50 for a meal that would run \$5 over here. The food is excellent."

"I seldom go out at night; generally keep out of the bars and keep from getting into crowds of Americans. The Viet Cong usually will not waste a bomb just to get one or two Americans in Saigon."

"But they're around. Even get jobs with the American military and sneak in bombs. You can go 20 miles out of the city in certain areas during the day, but at night the Viet Cong control the roads."

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Devine said that since the marines arrived there is more optimism in the north, that is, out in the fields. It is felt out there that the fighting will be over in six months. In Saigon they give it two years.

"Saigon is a very busy city. When it isn't busy, that's when you worry and stay indoors. When you're there for awhile you can feel it; traffic



Tom Devine

is less. I've stayed in as long as three days," said the super-salesman.

Devine was reluctant to comment on his political impressions because he plans to return in June.

He has a "captive" area of customers — the some 45,000 Americans starving for entertainment and recreation.

This helps, as was evident when he ordered one automatic popcorn machine from the home office, and through a clerical error, a "9" was added after the "1."

Nineteen automatic popcorn machines arrived in Saigon. Devine sold them all.

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