

Only 3 Bombs a Week in Saigon

Business Lousy at EOD—Luckily

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"In this business there are but two degrees of proficiency: complete success or absolute failure."

—Sign at 170th Explosive Ord. Det., Saigon

SAIGON — No one knew who owned the mysterious, black attache case. It was conspicuously out of place, right in the middle of the lobby of a downtown Saigon bachelor enlisted quarter (BEQ). A nervous Vietnamese desk clerk looked frantically for someone who recognized the attache case. No results. He reached for the telephone.

At the 170th Explosive Ord. Det. (EOD) in downtown Saigon, the call came through for a "signal 100." That meant someone had found an item that might explode. In 30 seconds, Sgt. 1.C. Ralph Tate and Spec. 5 Louie Caruso were weaving quickly through Saigon traffic toward the scene.

The MPs were there and had cleared everyone from the area. Caruso gripped the case tightly and Tate began cutting into it with surgical scissors. "The last thing you want to do in a case like this," he said, "is open something the way it should be opened."

The sergeant peered through the cut in the brief case. Papers. He prodded with

a knife and found more papers. After a thorough inspection, the case was deemed harmless and was left with the now-smiling clerk to await its absent-minded owner.

At the EOD compound, M.Sgt. Charles McCrary, a veteran of 11 months with the Saigon detachment, reflected on the incident. "At least 50 per cent of the calls we receive are false alarms," he said. "Mostly vehicle checks and misplaced personal property. We don't get as many devices as we used to."

McCrary said his unit averaged two explosive devices a day when he came into the country, but since the Cambodian incursion the number has fallen to one every two days.

"Things are slow, real slow now," said S.Sgt. Melvin Clark, who just arrived here. "We had more action back in the states."

There are times, though, when the EOD men dig into something and find plastic explosive. The biggest incident in more than a year came last November, then they found a pushcart laden with explosives in front of a cluster of BEQ's and BOQ's in the Cholon section of Saigon.

Spec. 5 Joe Jiminez was one of the EOD men sent to the scene. "There were two small, diversionary explosions, and that brought everyone into the streets, just like we tell them not to do," he recalled. "We

searched for a possible main charge and found this pushcart, right in the middle of the street, unnoticed in the confusion. We could see a fuse running out the bottom."

While he was cutting into the pushcart, there was no time to be afraid, Jiminez explained. "We were too busy thinking of steps to go through and checking off procedures with our partners. Fear is lack of knowledge, I guess, and we like to think we have enough knowledge to keep fear to a minimum."

Inside the pushcart, the EOD men found 170 pounds of Communist-made explosive. The fuse had failed to ignite. "Twenty pounds of explosive is enough to damage a building," said McCrary. "I'd hate to even think what that charge would have done."

Since the all-volunteer, 10-man detachment came to Vietnam in 1965, one man has been killed — the detachment commanding officer was shot at the site of a call last year.

In spite of the danger involved, the men in EOD wish they had more work. "When you don't get calls, the time really drags," said Clark.

"I suppose I could get blown up someday," said McCrary, a veteran of nine years working with explosive ordnance. "But then, I suppose I could get run over by a Honda, too."