

Frank DiMatteo

One of the 'Gentle Americans'

FRANK Di Matteo, 51, is a builder—a builder of highways and, more important, a builder of good will toward the sometimes “Ugly American.”

As the resident engineer on a highway construction project in Saigon, South Viet Nam, DiMatteo combines engineering skill with diplomacy in working with his 45-man crew of native Vietnamese engineers.

His Saigon assignment calls for establishing a highway department for the government of South Viet Nam and reconstructing approximately 350 miles of roads and 110 bridges.

DiMatteo is responsible for the design and layout of all roads, plant sites and facilities, such as quarries, asphalt plants, casting yards, concrete plants, equipment repair shops and warehouses. As part of this project he must also orient the native workmen in the intricacies of standard U. S. construction techniques employing the latest equipment.

“In addition to on-the-job training,” DiMatteo explains, “I have been acting in the capacity of a public relations officer by exposing the public to our activities in the American foreign aid team family.”

Besides learning the language of his workers, DiMatteo has personally paid for English-language instruction for the local engineers and workmen who are helping him do the job.

He was described in an article last year by Warren Rogers, Jr., of the *New York Herald Tribune* as one of the “‘Gentle Americans’ whom the Orientals accept” . . . those who “sometimes balance out the arrogant and uncouth ones whose behavior has somewhat damaged the image of America in the Far East.”

In an area of bitter haggling between communism and western forces, total acceptance by the native people is not easy to achieve. Where the universal habit of socking the government for everything possible is a favorite game, where the monetary exchange system is a black market racket, the simple diplomacy of one American working man is worth millions of American foreign aid dollars. The successful American in ser-

vice abroad has learned just who is really the foreigner.

How does a foreigner gain the friendship of an equally foreign people? DiMatteo believes that understanding and good team work can only be acquired by adequate means of communication and that natural friendship is America's greatest weapon.

Foreign service is familiar to DiMatteo. He was born in 1923 in Avellino, Italy. Now his home base is Mt. Vernon, New York. He saw service abroad with the Navy during the war. From 1953 to 1957 he and his company, Johnson, Drake & Piper, Inc., worked in Goose Bay, Labrador, on an air base construction project. In July, 1957, he began work in Saigon.

In the course of his career he has been an aircraft mechanic, a landscape contractor and a civil engineer. DiMatteo speaks Spanish and Italian fluently, a smattering of French, and he has learned to speak Vietnamese in Saigon.

“I enjoy working abroad,” he says. “It is not only broadening and educational, but gratifying to be able to contribute my share as an American.

“America's greatest contribution toward preventing further growth of communism is for America's representatives

to acquaint themselves with the local people and just be themselves.”

Acceptance by the people is a vital factor in successful foreign projects, but an American sometimes finds it difficult to shed his old habits and don new ones.

“I believe I have been accepted as a friend by a number of local personnel, both Vietnamese and Chinese,” DiMatteo says. “One of the unusual but pleasant customs here is shaking hands whenever one meets and departs, no matter how often the meeting takes place.

“Another rather unusual practice,” he says, “is in driving. All vehicles on the right have the right-of-way, even those coming out of a driveway.”

Through the sometimes subtle, sometimes cruel influence of the West, DiMatteo believes Viet Nam is losing its totally Oriental face.

“Viet Nam has been influenced to some extent by Westerners,” he explains. “Its culture and custom can best be described as an Oriental-Western blend. Indeed, this is fascinating to the newcomer.”

But fascinating or not, life in Viet Nam can be frustrating and hectic. Yet Frank DiMatteo—American, foreigner, builder—simply changes his ways and carries on.



A new bridge beam is inspected by DiMatteo, right, for one of 110 bridges he is building for South Viet Nam.