

Marine Advisors with the Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units 1966-1970
Colonel Andrew Finlayson USMC (Retired)
Extracted various portions on Rodney H. Pupuhi

Rodney H. Pupuhi in 1968 illustrates the recruiting challenges faced by the PRU in I Corps. When he reported to his PRU unit in Hoi An, Quang Nam Province, in March 1968 shortly after the Tet Offensive, he was not encouraged by what he found. The Quang Nam PRU was in the midst of being disbanded, and only seven PRU members remained out of the original pre-Tet force of more than 100 men. Like any good Marine noncommissioned officer, Sergeant Pupuhi immediately took charge of the situation, held a formation of his remaining seven-man PRU force, made them squad leaders, and sent them to their home villages to recruit replacements for each squad. As he put it, "I gave these men strict guidelines on recruiting and a deadline of two weeks to return with enough recruits to fill the seven squads. Slowly, these men came back with 'family within family' recruits—that is, brothers recruited other brothers and nephews recruited cousins until we had the necessary numbers to fill the squads." Pupuhi arranged with the CIA to give the recruits' families advance pay and to have Air America fly the recruits to Hoi An. In short order, Pupuhi had resurrected the Hoi An PRU with reliable men and had embarked on a rigorous training program to prepare his new recruits for their demanding and dangerous missions. Within six weeks of his arrival in Hoi An, he had recruited, trained, and equipped his new unit and began conducting counter-VCI operations.



Photo courtesy of GySgt Rodney H. Pupuhi

Pupuhi on far right

A more typical Provincial Reconnaissance Unit operation showing uniforms and equipment as worn by the Vietnamese and Americans. This was more characteristic than the VC or NVA uniforms shown before.

Sergeant Rodney H. Pupuhi: I Corps, Post-Tet 1968

Sergeant Rodney H. Pupuhi, a native of Hawaii, enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1954 and served until 1957 when he left the active Marine Corps and joined the Marine Corps Reserve. In 1962, his reserve infantry unit was reorganized as the 6th Force Reconnaissance Company, and he began several years of intensive training in parachuting, scuba diving, and other reconnaissance skills.



*Photo courtesy of GySgt Rodney H. Pupuhi
Sergeant Rodney H. Pupuhi, second on the left in civilian clothes, with unit leaders of Quang Nam Provincial Reconnaissance Unit during his tour in 1968.*

As a highly trained reconnaissance Marine with a strong urge to test his skills in combat, Sergeant Pupuhi decided to rejoin the active Marine Corps in 1965 and volunteer to go to Vietnam. He served in a detachment of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion assigned to the 5th Marines in I Corps. When the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion deployed to Vietnam, Sergeant Pupuhi joined the battalion at Chu Lai. In March 1968 he received orders to report to the PRU as the replacement for Sergeant William A. Polchow, the Marine PRU advisor in Hoi An, Quang Nam Province, who was killed in action near Hoi An on 23 January 1968, just a few days prior to the Tet Offensive.

Pupuhi's introduction to the PRU started with a jeep ride from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion's base at Camp Reasoner on the eastern slope of Hill 327 west of Da Nang City to

a meeting with his “CIA contact.” The CIA officer drove “an old beat-up 4x4 Ford Bronco, wore a shoulder holster, and was dressed in civilian clothes.” He drove Pupuhi to the embassy house in Da Nang City, which Pupuhi remembered as “a villa surrounded by barbed wire with four guard towers at each corner of the compound and manned by Vietnamese guards in camouflage uniforms.” Inside the villa, he was introduced to a U.S. Marine “Colonel Moon,” 30 who welcomed him aboard and gave him strict instructions about who he was to take orders from and what he could and could not do while assigned to the PRU.

Sergeant Pupuhi was quickly processed into the program. He had his picture taken for a Vietnamese police ID and was told the ID identified him as an officer, not an enlisted man. The ID was signed by a South Vietnamese general, whom he believed was the senior Vietnamese officer in Quang Nam Province. He was assigned a Mitsubishi Jeep and sent to the CIA armory to sign for his personal weapons, a Swedish K submachine gun, a Browning 9-millimeter automatic pistol, and a 25-caliber Berretta pistol. He was also issued a case of ammunition for each weapon.

Pupuhi was given \$200 to buy civilian clothes at the Freedom Hill PX and then, after a few days, he was flown to Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut air base on an Air America flight from the Da Nang air base. In Saigon, he was briefed by a CIA officer called John in one of the upper floors of the American embassy, then he was driven to the MACV headquarters, where he was briefed by a woman Marine major who was in charge of the section that would take care of his personal records and pay.

While in Saigon, Sergeant Pupuhi was given a room at the Duc Hotel, which was leased to the CIA for the agency’s exclusive use. He, along with three other new PRU advisors, received two weeks of training from a CORDS instructor who seemed to go out of his way to stress the danger awaiting them. Pupuhi also spent a few days at the CIA training facility at Vung Tau before he was sent north to take over his PRU teams in Hoi An. His instruction at Vung Tau was cut short because of the necessity to replace the PRU advisor in Hoi An, Sergeant Pulchow, who had been killed during a combined PRU-Vietnamese Navy operation against the VCI. When he left Vung Tau, he was told that his immediate mission was “to restore the unit at Hoi An.”

In Hoi An, Pupuhi lived in what was called “the little embassy,” a very large white one story villa with an adjacent warehouse in which were stored “uniforms, web gear, boots, weapons, and anything else needed for war.” Twenty Chinese Nung guards protected the house, with four of them on duty at all times. In addition to Pupui, there were three other Americans living in the villa. They were the POIC, who was a retired U.S. Air Force colonel, and two Marine lieutenants, one of whom was in charge of the Rural Development Program.

The POIC had several Vietnamese working for him, but they did not live in the house; they only worked there doing administrative jobs. According to Pupuhi, these Vietnamese workers “were very dependable and loyal” and appeared to enjoy the complete trust of the POIC since they often typed classified letters and reports for him.

Pupuhi’s right-hand man was his interpreter, Bu Than Ming, whom Pupuhi described as “a tall, lanky Vietnamese man who wore an Air Force baseball cap, soft-type flak jacket, skin tight trousers, and pilot’s sunglasses.” Ming had worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Air Force before coming to the PRU, and he spoke English fluently. Ming worked with Pupuhi to resurrect the Quang Nam PRU from a force of only seven members to over 100 in just a few short weeks. He helped Pupuhi to create the personnel folders for each PRU

recruit, to have them receive their initial medical exams at the German hospital in Hoi An, and to make sure the new recruits were fed and clothed properly and their families cared for.



Sergeant Pupuhi on the right with a Swedish K submachine gun. On the left is his interpreter, Mr. Ming. Taken in Quang Nam Province in 1968. Photo courtesy of GySgt Rodney H. Pupuhi

Since the PRU was newly formed—or more accurately, reformed—Pupuhi spent a lot of time training his new recruits so they would be able to begin patrolling and conducting counter-VCI missions. This included a lot of time teaching them the proper care and cleaning of their individual and crew-served weapons, scouting and patrolling techniques, land navigation, marksmanship, first aid, and communications. His PRU was equipped with M-16 rifles, M-79 grenade launchers, 45-caliber Colt automatic pistols, and M-60 machine guns. He conducted a weapons inspection every morning before training. They also had two 4x4 Honda trucks, which were inadequate for all the PRU members to ride in at one time. This resulted in the vehicles often being “packed like sardines with standing room only” when they were used to transport the PRU on a mission.

Most PRU missions involved night ambushes near or in VC-controlled villages.

Pupuhi recalled that only once did they encounter a VC effort to penetrate the Quang Nam PRU. AVC had married into the family of a PRU member and used this family connection to enlist in the PRU. However, since the PRU had several former VC among their ranks, they soon became suspicious of this individual and began an internal investigation into his background. His family members provided information that cast doubt on his loyalty, and objects were found among his personal effects that proved he was in contact with the VC.

A few days later, the PRU took the VC spy on a patrol near Hoi An. When the patrol returned, they informed Pupui that the spy had been killed in a contact with the enemy and they had buried him in a shallow grave approximately a mile from the PRU compound. The spy's family was informed that he had died while on patrol, and they were given the normal death gratuity that all the families of PRU members killed in action were given. Pupuhi was suspicious about the death of the VC spy and cautioned the PRU members that in the future, they were never to take summary action against any person, regardless of the evidence. Pupuhi reported the incident to the province chief for his action but never heard anything further regarding it.

Sergeant Pupuhi retired from the Marine Corps in 1973 with the rank of gunnery sergeant and went on to complete a second career with the Hawaii State Sheriff's Office.