

Rice Paddy Recon: A Marine Officer's Second Tour in Vietnam, 1968–1970

Andrew R. Finlayson (McFarland & Company Publishers, 2014), 310 pp., bibliography, photos, maps, index.

Reviewed by Charles D.

This is Andrew Finlayson's second memoir focused on his service in the Vietnam War. A retired colonel of Marines, he writes in this one of his second tour in Vietnam, which lasted 19 months. His first memoir treated his tour as a Marine reconnaissance officer in northern South Vietnam. Finlayson has also written a scholarly account for the Marine Corps about Marine advisers—like himself—who served with the Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU). The PRU were CIA's Vietnamese action arm in the Phoenix Program, which sought to neutralize the political infrastructure of the Viet Cong (VC) in South Vietnam.^a

Rice Paddy Recon has at least four distinct parts. It begins as a first-person account of the author's time at the start of his second tour as an operations officer with the Marine First Force Reconnaissance Company. Next, Finlayson covers his tour as a rifle company commander in the Second Battalion, Fifth Marines (2/5). This is followed by his assignment with the PRU in Tay Ninh Province. He concludes with an epilogue containing his analysis of why the United States lost the war in Vietnam.

Stitching together his several perspectives from an unusually varied and long tour could not have been easy. To tell his stories, Finlayson draws from his memory, almost daily letters home, official Marine unit histories, and recollections of colleagues. In addition, he deploys a wealth of personal photos and maps. While this is a generally successful approach, it results in parts of the book having differing styles and language, something that take some getting used to. For example, his accounts of operations or patrols that he accompanied have a different style from his accounts of those he did not join. In the latter, he relies on the detailed original patrol reports. In some instances, readers may find too many details on the color

of the enemy's uniforms, types and numbers of weapons, and equipment.

Finlayson provides context for the Vietnam era as he discusses the attitude of the US media towards the war, enemy use of propaganda, and racial tensions in the US military. He personalizes his account by writing about his feelings for the Vietnamese people and the close friendships he made there. One of those has its own chapter and is titled "Qua's Story." It is an account of Tran Van Qua, a Kit Carson Scout, whom Finlayson worked with while serving in 2/5. Qua was a Viet Cong fighter who rallied to the South Vietnamese government in response to the Chieu Hoi program, an effort to encourage guerrillas to switch sides. Drawing on their long discussions, Finlayson gives the reader a glimpse of Qua's life as a VC.

Rice Paddy Recon has powerful descriptions of combat and Finlayson's notes on lessons learned from dealing with improvised explosive devices, a problem in Vietnam, will resonate with those who are serving or have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. His efforts to develop innovative new techniques and equipment for inserting recon teams into terrain too difficult to accommodate a helicopter landing zone are praiseworthy and a good lesson in problem solving. Finlayson also describes how he instituted regular "lessons learned" meetings for his recon team leaders to share information.

Finlayson handles the retelling of some interpersonal conflicts with discretion. While he invariably mentions the names and ranks of Marines he wants to single out for service, he often refers to those with whom he had conflicts only by their positions. That was the case of one division G-3 (Operations) staff officer who ordered Finlayson to set up an entire Marine rifle company on a map location that happened in reality to be a steep, near cliff-like, slope. It was impossible for a company to occupy the spot. The haranguing he received for not following the orders to the letter led Finlayson to conclude of this officer that he was "not dealing with a rational human being."

a. Andrew Finlayson, *Killer Kane: A Marine Long-Range Recon Team Leader in Vietnam, 1967–1968* (McFarland & Co. Publishers, 2013) and *Marine Advisors with the Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units, 1966–1970* (USMC History Division, 2009).

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Finlayson describes the disappointment of his long “R and R” (rest and relaxation) trip to London, which he obtained in return for extending his tour in Vietnam to a total of 19 months. He planned to visit Captain Robert Asprey, a retired World War II Marine veteran living in Oxford, who was researching and writing on guerrilla warfare. Having looked forward to an intellectual encounter with a leader in the field, Finlayson was disappointed to discover that Asprey was pessimistic about the Vietnam War and did not believe the United States could win it. Ultimately as a post-script, Finlayson reveals they had a final falling out over one of Asprey’s books.

Before Finlayson began his unconventional tour as a PRU adviser, he was a classic Marine officer—a Naval Academy graduate to boot—with the traditional military rank consciousness. When he reports to CIA in Tay Ninh he meets a US Army Special Forces noncommissioned officer assigned to work with him, but they do not hit it off. Finlayson does not appreciate the NCO’s casual manner and habit of using first names with officers and threatens to relieve him for not addressing him “Sir.

Finlayson writes that his mentor in the new assignment was Charles “Chuck” Stainbeck, an experienced and affable case officer who was CIA’s officer in charge in Tay Ninh. (The memoir is dedicated to Stainbeck’s memory.) Finlayson details how the PRU supported the Phoenix Program mainly through intelligence collection and the arrest of VC cadre. He tells how, over time, restrictions on PRU advisors increased, along with attendant frustrations and problems.

Finlayson admits he was not a trained intelligence officer and that he was not involved in running CIA sources, although he offers in one chapter an analysis of a source handled in the province by a CIA case officer. In “America’s Most Valuable Spy,” Finlayson says he learned of the agent from his case officer—sometimes during the offi-

cer’s drunken indiscretions—and from other CIA officers. He had no direct knowledge himself. When Finlayson left Tay Ninh he was replaced by legendary CIA officer Felix Rodriguez, who was responsible for the demise of Che Guevara in Bolivia and who later, after retirement, became embroiled in the Iran-Contra affair.

In the epilogue Finlayson acknowledges how the Vietnam War changed his life. He writes that he spent many years studying the war, including at the US Naval War College, trying to comprehend why we lost it. He describes how the US was reluctant to support the French in Vietnam because the effort appeared doomed. Yet, when the task fell upon the United States to defend South Vietnam, that same conclusion was not reached and the United States pursued a failed strategy. He analyzes North Vietnam’s wartime strategy, including the creation and use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to supply the fighters and the logistical system for its operations in South Vietnam. Finlayson’s conclusion is that the trail is what allowed North Vietnam to enter the third phase of communist-doctrine guerrilla warfare, mobile warfare. In retrospect, he offers a plan that he asserts would have cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail by having US forces stationed in Laos. Without the trail network and the logistical support and troop movements it allowed, he believes the United States would have won the war. The reader will have to judge. Perhaps more important than that judgment is the epilogue’s call to study our current conflicts—or those we are about to enter—and understand both our strategies and the enemy’s and how they align.

Rice Paddy Recon should appeal to those interested in Vietnam and Marine Corps history. The book has unique value as a history of a CIA paramilitary operation in Vietnam, and it deserves a place on the bookshelves of today’s CIA paramilitary officers. Colonel Finlayson faithfully served the Corps, CIA, and our country in war. He continues to provide a great service through his writings.

