

Lewis “Chesty” Puller – Korean War

BLUF: Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller served as a United States Marine for 37 years. Entering the Marine Corps in 1918, Puller saw combat action during the Banana Wars, World War II, and the Korean conflict. By the time of his retirement in 1955, he had reached the rank of lieutenant general. Puller is one of the most decorated Marines in American history. He is one of two United States servicemen awarded five Navy Crosses and one Army Distinguished Service Cross. During his career, Puller received the nickname “Chesty.” The name's origins are unclear, though legend states that his chest was blown away and replaced with steel.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness, Tact, Integrity, Endurance, Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm.

SETTING THE STAGE: Lewis Burwell Puller was born on 26 June 1898 in West Point, Virginia. Matthew and Patti Leigh Puller ran a local grocery store in West Point, raising the three Puller children. At age 10, Puller's father died, leaving the rest of the family to run the business. Puller had to juggle duties at the store with his schoolwork daily. History was his favorite subject because of his family ancestry and local stories he listened to as he grew up. In 1916 Puller attempted to join the U.S. Army to fight in the Mexican Border War; however, Puller was too young to sign the papers independently. His mother refused to sign the documents but promised he could attend Virginia Military Academy if accepted. In 1917 Puller was accepted at VMI, but the beginning of World War I for the U.S. changed his direction. Inspired by the stories of the 5th Marines at Belleau Wood, Puller left VMI and joined the Marine Corps.

Joining the Marine Corps in August 1918, Puller completed boot camp at Port Royal (Parris Island), SC. His first assignment was with the 188th Company, 15th Regiment, at the non-commissioned officer's school in Quantico. He also attended the commissioned officer's school, receiving his commission as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserves. Because of the reduction of forces after World War I, Puller was reduced in rank to corporal and placed on the inactive list. To remain as an active Marine, Puller had to accept a demotion to the rank of private. As an active duty private, Puller left for Haiti in June 1919 to join the Constabulary Detachment at Port Au Prince. While in Haiti, Puller participated in 42 combat engagements against the Caco Rebels. He attempted twice to regain his commission, instead promoted to the rank of sergeant in 1922 while serving as adjutant to Major Alexander Vandegrift. Puller reacquired his commission in 1924. From 1924 to 1941, He served at eight different postings, including China, Nicaragua, and The Basic School in Philadelphia. He received two Navy Cross awards while serving in Nicaragua.

In August 1941, Puller commanded the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division at Camp Lejeune. In September 1942, the unit went to Guadalcanal, where Puller earned his third Navy Cross. He earned a fourth Navy Cross at Cape Gloucester in January 1944. In February 1944, Puller commanded the 1st Marine Regiment and led them to Peleliu, returning to the United States in January 1945 to command the Marine Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Lejeune. In August 1946, he became director of the 8th Marine Reserve District at New Orleans, then commanded the Marine Barracks at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, until August 1950, when he became commander of the reestablished 1st Marine Regiment, leading them during the Inchon invasion.

THE STORY: At the Korean War outbreak, Puller was again assigned as commander of the First Marine Regiment. He participated in the landing at Inchon on 15 September 1950 and was awarded the Silver Star Medal. For his leadership from 15 September to 2 November, Puller was awarded his second Legion of Merit. He was also awarded the Distinguished Service Cross from the U.S. Army for heroism in battle from 29 November to 4 December, and his fifth Navy Cross for heroism at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir in December 1950. It was during that Chosin Reservoir campaign that he said the famous line, "We've been looking for the enemy for some time now. We've finally found him. We're surrounded. That simplifies things."

In January 1951, Puller was promoted to brigadier general and was assigned duty as assistant division commander of the 1st Marine Division. On 24 February, however, his immediate superior, Major General O. P. Smith, was hastily transferred to command IX Corps when its Army commander, Major General Bryant Moore, died of a heart attack. Smith's transfer left Puller temporarily in command of the 1st Marine Division until March. He completed his tour of duty as assistant commander and left for the U.S. on 20 May 1951. For the next year, Puller served as commander of the 3rd Marine Division at Camp Pendleton. He then took over Troop Training Unit Pacific at Coronado, California, which included a promotion to major general in September 1953.

AFTERMATH: Puller retired from the Marine Corps in 1955 following a stroke after 37 years of service. He remains a well-known figure in Marine Corps folklore, with original and exaggerated tales of his repeated experiences among Marines. A typical incantation in Marine Corps boot camp is to end one's day with the declaration, "Good night, Chesty, wherever you are!" Another frequent encouragement is, "Chesty Puller, never quit!" In Marine Corps recruit training and OCS cadences, Marines chant, "It was good for Chesty Puller/And it's good enough for me" as well as "Tell Chesty Puller I did my best." Marines, while doing push-ups, will tell each other to "do one for Chesty!"

Puller insisted upon proper equipment and discipline. Once, he came upon a second lieutenant who had ordered an enlisted man to salute him 100 times for neglecting a salute. Puller told the young lieutenant, "You were absolutely correct in making him salute you 100 times, Lieutenant, but you know that an officer must return every salute he receives. Now return them all, and I will keep count." While on duty in Hawaii and inspecting the armory, Puller fined himself \$100 for accidentally discharging a .45 caliber pistol indoors, although the charge for his men was only \$20.

In 1966, he requested a return to active duty in Vietnam but was turned down due to his age. He died in Hampton, Virginia, after a long illness on 11 October 1971 at 73. Puller is buried next to his wife, Virginia, at the Christ Church Cemetery in Christchurch, Middlesex County, Virginia.

QUESTIONS

1. What makes "Chesty" Puller the most exceptional Marine of his time?
2. Why are the leadership traits of "bearing and courage" the most dominant in "Chesty" Puller's character?
3. How did "Chesty" Puller receive his nickname?

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