

This Day in History... June 26, 1898

Birth of Chesty Puller

Lewis Burwell “Chesty” Puller was born on June 26, 1898, in West Point, Virginia.

As a child, Puller enjoyed listening to the tales of Civil War veterans and particularly idolized “Stonewall” Jackson. He had hoped to join in the Border War with Mexico in 1916, but he was too young and his mother wouldn’t consent to let him go.

Puller then went to the Virginia Military Institute in 1917, but left the following year to join in World War I. Hearing tales of the 5th Marines at Belleau Wood, he decided to join the Marines and “go where the guns are.” Puller never saw action in the war, but went on to attend the non-commissioned officer school and Officer Candidates School.



From the Distinguished Marines issue



Stamp depicts Marines disembarking from their landing craft and heading toward the beach at Guadalcanal.

As American forces were reduced following the war, Puller was put on inactive status. He later received orders to go to Haiti as part of the Banana Wars. The Banana Wars were a series of US military invasions and occupations in the Caribbean, Central America, and northern South America conducted to protect US business interests. In Haiti, Puller took part in more than 40 fights over five years. Then in 1928, Puller was sent to Nicaragua for a similar mission. While there, he received two Navy Crosses. The first was for leading “five successive engagements against superior numbers of armed bandit forces.” The second was for leading Nicaraguan National Guardsmen in the final battle of the rebellion. After that conflict, Puller went to China twice to command Chinese and American Marines.

Just before World War II, Puller was placed in command of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. In 1942, they landed at Guadalcanal, where Puller earned his third Navy Cross. In one action alone, his Marines killed 1,400 hostile troops, held ground until reinforcements arrived, and suffered fewer than 70 casualties. He earned his fourth Navy Cross for action on Cape Gloucester, New Britain, in 1944. When the leaders of two battalions were wounded, he took over and moved through heavy fire to command their units.



Puller earned a Purple Heart for wounds received at Guadalcanal.

Puller returned to the US in November 1944 and held a series of leadership positions. Then in 1950, as America entered the Korean War, he was called upon once again to lead Marines into battle. Puller was over 50 years old when he took part in the September 1950 Battle of Inchon as commander of the 1st Marine Regiment. Puller led his men fearlessly as the UN forces, made up mostly of Americans, advanced north following the retreating North Korean People’s Army.



Based on 1950 photo of US troops retreating from Chosin Reservoir.

By December, they were near the Chosin Reservoir when China’s People’s Volunteer Army poured over the China-North Korea border and surrounded the UN army. When Puller was updated about the dire situation he said, “We’ve been looking for the enemy for some time now. We’ve finally found him. We’re surrounded. That simplifies things.” His Marines managed to keep supply lines open and acted as rear guard during withdrawal. They destroyed seven of the enemy’s 22 divisions and inflicted heavy casualties on the rest. Puller was awarded his fifth Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism during the operation, the most of any Marine in US history.

After completing his tour of duty in Korea, Puller trained Marines in North Carolina. He suffered a stroke and retired in 1955. He died on October 11, 1971.

Puller was and still remains a popular figure and esprit de corps in the Marines.

During boot camp, it’s common for Marines to say “Good night, Chesty, wherever you are!” They may also exclaim, “Chesty Puller never quit!” or tell each other while doing push-ups “do one for Chesty!” There’s also “It was good for Chesty Puller and it’s good enough for me” as well as “Tell Chesty Puller I did my best.”

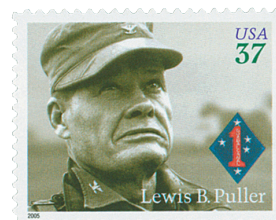
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