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Chesty: The Story of Lieutenant General Lewis B. Puller, USMC

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in the social whirl of Washington, D.C. There he met Phyllis Thompson, a society reporter for the thriving *Washington Star*. They were married within a year. Throughout the rest of his career they remained a devoted couple. Phyllis was always the exemplary Navy wife (she published a book by that title), uncomplaining about the frequent moves and long separations, and a pillar of support for her husband in all his varied endeavors and often bizarre adventures.

During World War II, Wright commanded major forces in action and served on personal liaison missions for the Allies. After the war he served in the Pentagon, where, because of his combat experience, he was assigned to develop the operating policies for the postwar Navy.

The real star in Wright's crown, however, was his tour as Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic, one of the two top posts in Nato. He handled that job with such distinction that he served for six years in what was normally a two-year assignment. His experiences in that critical post at the height of the Cold War should be of special interest to naval historians and students of modern history.

After retiring from active duty as a four-star admiral in 1960, he performed his final service to the country in 1963, when, at the urging of the secretary of state, President John F. Kennedy appointed Wright to serve as U.S. ambassador to Taiwan. Again Wright answered the call of his country to serve in an assignment of great responsibility and unusual sensitivity, one especially significant because of the instability of the Chinese Nationalist government and the potential threat to U.S. vital national interests.

David Key's lack of familiarity with military jargon has allowed an occasional

error to creep in, but these are few and minor, limited generally to a garbled acronym or the misspelling of a ship's name. Otherwise the book rings with the authority of an action report.

Admiral Jerauld Wright is a delightful book, easy to pick up and hard to put down. It is a biography of a splendid individual whose service and contributions to his country constitute a significant historical record in itself. It is a story that unfolds with the candor and humor of a special person whose intellect and charm made him a "diplomat among warriors."

J. L. HOLLOWAY
Admiral, U.S. Navy, Retired



Hoffman, Jon T. *Chesty: The Story of Lieutenant General Lewis B. Puller, USMC*. New York: Random House, 2001. 629pp. \$35

In the heralded history of the U.S. Marine Corps, Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller occupies a unique position. Long revered as the greatest hero in the Corps, Puller is the only Marine to earn five Navy Crosses. His career spanned thirty-seven years, during which he mastered the entire spectrum of warfare, from chasing the guerrilla leader Augusto Sandino in the jungles of Nicaragua to commanding a Marine regiment in the bitter fighting near the Chosin reservoir. Most Marines are familiar with Burke Davis's 1962 account of Puller's life, but fellow leatherneck Jon T. Hoffman has produced what is likely to become the definitive biography of this extraordinary officer.

Hoffman is no stranger to biography. His *Once a Legend: "Red Mike" Edson of the Marine Raiders* earned rave reviews from a number of distinguished military historians and editors. As he did with Edson,

Hoffman uses private papers, personal military records, and recently declassified federal documents in his attempt to discover the “real” Puller, stripped of decades of mythology and near canonization. What makes this current biography so intriguing is Hoffman’s willingness to confront the more controversial aspects of Puller’s career, such as his performance at Peleliu, where his unit’s casualty rate exceeded 54 percent, as well as his alleged indifference toward junior officers and to other services.

Puller was born in the Virginia Tidewater in 1898 and enlisted in the Marine Corps on 25 July 1918, too late to fight in World War I. He first saw combat during the interwar period, when the United States frequently dispatched Marines to quell domestic disturbances throughout the Caribbean. The Puller legend was born in Haiti and Nicaragua, where he earned the sobriquet “El Tigre” and established a reputation as a brilliant small-unit leader. His aggressive leadership won two Navy Crosses. Extended foreign service in China and aboard Captain Chester Nimitz’s flagship, USS *Augusta* (CA 31), added new laurels to Puller’s growing reputation.

With the advent of World War II, Puller actively sought combat duty. In September 1942 his battalion deployed to Guadalcanal. One month later, he had earned his third Navy Cross, in the defense of Henderson Field. Following a short interlude, Puller won a fourth Navy Cross in the battle at Cape Gloucester, on New Britain Island. On both occasions, Puller’s spirited leadership prevented the desperate and determined enemy from penetrating his defenses. On Guadalcanal particularly, his officers and men were almost universal in their praise of his courage and leadership under fire.

It was on New Britain that Puller first attracted a great deal of criticism for allegedly using his own casualty figures as a measuring stick of how aggressively his men were fighting. This criticism reached new heights after Peleliu in September 1944, where a visibly tired Puller, now a regimental commander, sustained disproportionate casualties in eradicating the Japanese defenders. Hoffman rushes to his defense, noting that Puller’s unit did not have as much naval gunfire support available as the other regiments did, and that service doctrine dictated maintaining momentum, which Puller’s regiment had gained. Moreover, Hoffman points out, the terrain at Peleliu offered little opportunity for maneuver; frontal assault is almost always costly.

Allegations of Puller’s lack of tactical imagination resurfaced in Korea, where his regiment was instrumental in retaking Seoul in the immediate aftermath of the Inchon landing. House-to-house fighting proved slow and deadly, but Puller took justifiable pride in his regiment’s role in seizing the South Korean capital. Puller’s leadership during the fighting withdrawal from the Chosin reservoir, in contrast, attracted a great deal of favorable publicity. It was in fact nothing short of inspirational, earning him his fifth and final Navy Cross.

Unfortunately, the years following Korea brought only disillusionment to Puller. Like General George S. Patton, Chesty Puller was ill suited to the peacetime establishment. He was never politically astute; his blunt remarks about rugged training and a “soft” American public created a hailstorm of criticism from a country long tired of war. What Puller desired most was command of a Marine division, but soon after he finally achieved that lofty ideal in 1954, a stroke

felled him, and he was relieved of command. Rather than retiring gracefully, however, Puller fought the medical examiner's board for over a year before the secretary of the Navy informed him in October 1955 that he would be retired.

For Puller, his forced retirement from active service was the ultimate betrayal by the commandant and Headquarters, Marine Corps. In his twilight years, however, Puller mellowed a bit and took personal satisfaction in seeing his family reach maturity. He volunteered for active service during the Vietnam War (his request was understandably denied). A vocal critic of government policy during the war, Puller watched his son, Lewis Puller, Jr., carry on the Puller name in combat.

As a sidelight, Hoffman provides an intimate portrayal of the relationship between father and son in the elder Puller's last days. Lewis Jr., who later recorded his own experiences in a Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography, *Fortunate Son*, was at his father's side when Chesty Puller, the greatest Marine in history, succumbed to pneumonia and kidney infection on 11 October 1971.

The Puller who emerges from these pages is not an altogether appealing figure but one who merits the accolades that generations of Marines have bestowed upon him. The fact that his Navy Crosses were awarded for leadership during critical stages of battle as opposed to individual acts of bravery in no way diminishes what Puller accomplished during his distinguished career. An unparalleled warrior and an enlisted leatherneck at heart, Chesty Puller remains the most famous and most revered Marine. It is fitting that we finally have a biography that does justice to this extraordinary officer.

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La Bree, Clifton. *The Gentle Warrior: General Oliver Prince Smith, USMC*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 2001. 268pp. \$32

Oliver Prince Smith was not present at Belleau Wood or Chateau Thierry. Neither did he chase Sandino in Nicaragua. He never served in Shanghai with the 4th Marines. He missed the fighting on Guadalcanal and Tarawa—early 1941 saw him with the 1st Marine Brigade in Iceland, returning to the United States in May 1942 for an eighteen-month stint in the newly formed headquarters Division of Plans and Policies. Consequently, Smith's first taste of combat did not come until early 1944—fully twenty-seven years after commissioning—at New Britain, where he served initially as chief of staff for the 1st Marine Division and shortly as commander, 5th Marines, for the Talasea Peninsula assault. Subsequently, at Peleliu he had the distinct misfortune to serve as assistant commander of the 1st Marine Division under Major General William H. Rupertus. He would finish his World War II service as Marine deputy chief of staff for the Tenth Army at Okinawa.

Smith went through the Reserve Officers Training Corps program at the University of California, Berkeley, and was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1917. He was ordered to Guam, followed by shipboard duty, then Washington, D.C., three years in Haiti, and the Army's Field Officer School at Fort Benning in 1931. Subsequently, Smith taught at Marine Corps Schools in Quantico, following which he became the first Marine officer to matriculate at the French *École de Guerre*. Returning to the United States, he was again assigned as an instructor at Quantico, where, because of his obvious