

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING | July 27, 2013

Why 'Chesty' Still Inspires the Marines

By AMANDA FOREMAN

The Korean War rarely gets a mention these days. Sandwiched between the epic struggle of World War II and the moral carnage of Vietnam, the conflict has suffered by comparison. It is all the more reason why the 60th anniversary of the Korean Armistice should not pass us by this week without a few moments of reflection.

The 2½-mile-wide demilitarized zone that separates North and



South Korea was officially established on July 27, 1953. To some, the DMZ's existence is another reason not to dwell on the war. But to others, it is an emblem of the hard-won peace that has since endured—a peace that was achieved with the help of men like Lt. Gen. Lewis "Chesty" Puller, the most highly decorated Marine in U.S. history.

Puller, who died in 1971, may be little known outside of the Marine Corps. But his name lives on among the men and women

who serve. At any Marine base around the world, the close of day is often greeted with the cry, "Goodnight, Chesty Puller, wherever you are."

Puller was in his early 50s when the Korean War began and already a legend in the Corps. He was old-style, the kind of soldier who insisted on leading his men from the front. In November 1950, Chesty, then a colonel with the 1st Marine Division, was dispatched to a remote area in North Korea known as the Chosin Reservoir.

As related in Jon T. Hoffman's "Chesty," the Marines barely had time to set up base camp when the Chinese People's Liberation Army attacked their position. The embedded journalists immediately confronted Chesty, demanding to know his plan. Calmly he replied: "We've been looking for the enemy for several days now. We've finally found them. We're surrounded. That simplifies our problem of finding these people and killing them."

His bravado wasn't simply for show. Chesty always stationed himself wherever the fighting was at its fiercest. At Chosin, the heat of action was around the base perimeter. When a frightened major dared to ask about the line of retreat, Chesty radioed the base's artillery commander and ordered him to fire on any soldier who abandoned his position; then he turned back to the unfortunate officer and said, "That answer your question? There will be no withdrawal."

The "Chesty effect" on the division was palpable. A battalion commander recalled: "Puller gave us pride in some way I can't describe. All of us had heard hundreds of stories about him. He kept building up our morale higher and higher, just by being there."

On Dec. 6, 1950, Chesty was ordered to break out of Chosin Reservoir and open an escape route to Hungnam port. The

80,000-strong PLA was no longer the only enemy confronting the Marines. By now the temperature had dropped to 25 degrees below zero. Fighting every step of the way, Chesty succeeded in not just bringing out the wounded and the dead but also every vehicle and piece of equipment worth saving. Behind him, spread out for miles, lay the broken remnants of seven Chinese divisions.

In his inimitable way, Chesty refused to call the retreat a defeat, let alone a retreat. As the future general waited to board his ship, he ordered reporters to "Remember, whatever you write, this was no retreat. All that happened was we found more Chinese behind us than in front of us. So we about-faced and attacked." The Navy rewarded Chesty for Chosin Reservoir with his fifth Navy Cross.

With a resurgent North Korea under Kim Jong Un once again threatening to destabilize the region, it is worth remembering that weapons are important but leaders like Lewis "Chesty" Puller are priceless.

Corrections & Amplifications

An earlier version of this article incorrectly said that Puller commanded the 1st Marine Division and referred to him as a general. He was a colonel at the time of the Chosin action but became a brigadier general shortly afterward.

A version of this article appeared July 27, 2013, on page C12 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Why 'Chesty' Still Inspires the Marines.