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MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Lifelong educator, Dr. Thomas Pullen (left) and Marine warrior, LtGen Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller, USMC (Ret) shared a common background—Marine boot camp—that cemented their 50-year friendship.

The Teacher and the Warrior:

A Story of Two Young Virginians Who Met as Marine Recruits

By David H. Hugel

Anyone who encountered Dr. Thomas G. Pullen Jr. late in his life when he served as president of the University of Baltimore knew he was a highly respected educator and courtly Southern gentleman. Few would have guessed, however, that shortly after graduating from college during World War I, he enlisted in the Marines, and became friends with another young Virginian who would go on to become a Marine Corps legend, Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller. Despite the different career paths they chose when the war ended, they would remain lifelong friends.

Thomas Granville Pullen Jr. was born in Madison County Court House, Va., Feb. 4, 1898, into a family with deep roots in that state. His father was a Methodist minister for various congregations in Tidewater Virginia. Young Tom Pullen attended public schools in Virginia, graduating Phi Beta



Early 20th century Marine Corps recruiting poster by James Montgomery Flagg

Kappa from the College of William and Mary in 1917.

Pullen taught school in Dinwiddie County, Va., for one year following his graduation, when, perhaps inspired by one of James Montgomery Flagg’s classic Marine recruiting posters, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps at the end of the 1918 school year. It may have been more than a coincidence that around the time Pullen enlisted, Marines were the topic of several favorable news dispatches from France touting their success in driving entrenched German troops from Belleau Wood, a heavily forested piece of land that once served as a private hunting preserve.

The three-week Battle of Belleau Wood, halting a German drive to capture Paris, was a turning point of WW I. It would become one of the most celebrated victories in Marine Corps history.

Enlisting with a college fraternity brother in Norfolk, Va., Pullen and his friend soon found themselves on a train bound for re-

cruit training at Paris Island, S.C.

Paris Island [spelled with one “r” from 1917 to 1919] was a relatively new Marine Corps base at that time, having been designated the site of Marine recruit training in 1915 after serving as a Naval Disciplinary Barracks for several years. Dr. Allan Millett, in his history of the Marine Corps, “Semper Fidelis,” provides a concise description of the training that recruits received during WW I.

According to Millett, “After receiving field uniforms, the men marched to their tents or barracks and started eight to 12 weeks of intense drill, physical training, forced marches and marksmanship, whipped on by the sharp tongues of the drill instructors.”

As Pullen recalled many years later in a letter to historian Burke Davis, “The days were exceedingly hot and very long and busy, but we could get together after chow time in the evenings and walk around the limited space available to us.” Through his college friend who was in another company, Pullen learned of another Virginian in that company from West Point, a town where Pullen’s father had served briefly as minister of the Methodist church nearly 20 years earlier. The other young Marine was Lewis B. Puller. He and Tom Pullen soon became close friends.

In his history, Millett notes that more than 46,000 young men received their recruit training at Paris Island during the war. Marine Corps enlisted ranks had swelled from 10,056 in 1916 to 72,639 by 1918. A great majority of those new Marines would join the American Expeditionary Forces in France fighting the German army, but Pullen would not be among them. Upon successfully completing recruit training in September 1918, he and his new friend Lewis Puller were assigned to NCO School, then also held at Paris Island.

The armistice ending the war became effective Nov. 11, 1918, before they completed their training. While disappointed that they had missed the excitement and perhaps the glory of fighting in the “War to End All Wars,” they both applied for and were selected to attend the 3d Officer Training Camp (OTC) beginning in early January 1919 at the recently established Marine Barracks, Quantico, Va.

As they did at NCO School, Pullen and Puller pursued their training with vigor and enthusiasm. They remained friends and when their training schedule allowed, went to the base canteen and movies together. Their OTC class graduated June 16, 1919, and they were commissioned second lieutenants the same day.

Among Thomas Pullen’s personal papers at the Marine Corps University’s Archives and Special Collections Branch is the

faded and brittle front page of the Friday, June 20, 1919, edition of Quantico’s base newspaper, *The Leatherneck*. The paper featured a long article about the 3d OTC’s graduation ceremony that occurred earlier that week.

None of the 235 graduates are mentioned by name, but the article includes

**“You don’t want to come
down here; stay in the states
and make something of
yourself. It’s a dog’s life.”**

—Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller



MARINE CORPS UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Tom Pullen (above) completed recruit training and NCO School and then was transferred to Quantico, Va., to attend the 3d Officer Training Camp with his new friend, Lewis “Chesty” Puller.

extensive remarks by Marine Major General Commandant George Barnett, who congratulated the class on its many accomplishments, but closed with an ominous warning of what the future might hold for the newly minted second lieutenants. He noted that if legislation, then pending before Congress, calling for downsizing the military, was enacted, many of those being commissioned soon would be mus-

tered out of the Marine Corps.

Another smaller article on the same page confirms the bad news predicted by MajGen Barnett. Referencing a June 19, 1919, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps order to all OTC graduates, the article reported that they would be transferred to inactive status on June 25. This order ended Tom Pullen’s Marine Corps service. He and Lewis Puller soon parted company, each going on to pursue their chosen careers.

The exploits of Lewis “Chesty” Puller are well chronicled and known to all Marines. Still wanting to see action, and based on discussions with a fellow officer, he resigned his commission, again enlisted in the Marine Corps and requested duty with the Gendarmerie d’Haiti. His request was granted, and he soon found himself bound for Haiti, arriving in Port-au-Prince in late July. Puller’s aggressive pursuit of Caco bandits soon marked him as a Marine who got the job done regardless of the odds.

Tom Pullen, too, would achieve renown, but as an educator, with a long and distinguished career that saw him rise from teacher to principal to superintendent of education, and ultimately university president. Throughout all the years, he and Puller remained close friends, regularly corresponding.

Returning to the classroom as a teacher and sometime principal after the war, Pullen taught in several Virginia public schools. He earned a master’s degree from Columbia University in 1925. In 1926, he accepted a position as principal of Catonsville High School in Baltimore County, Md.

Not long after resuming his teaching career, in May 1920, Pullen received a letter from his friend Lewis Puller, then serving as a member of the Gendarmerie d’Haiti. In the letter, Puller describes battling a malaria fever, which he claimed was abated by ingesting large quantities of West Indies rum, not the quinine prescribed by doctors. He also recounts receiving a decoration for a firefight during which several Caco bandits were killed.

Puller then goes on to report the brutal death of a fellow Marine, who had been a member of their OTC class, at the hands of the bandits, concluding, “You don’t want to come down here; stay in the states and make something of yourself. It’s a dog’s life.” There would be many more letters and visits between the two over the next 50 years.

As Puller advanced in his Marine Corps career, Tom Pullen succeeded as an educator. Following six years as principal of Catonsville High School, he was named Superintendent of Education for Talbot County, Md., in 1932. Two years later he

joined the Maryland Department of Education. Receiving a doctorate in education from Columbia University in 1940, Pullen was appointed Maryland Superintendent of Education in 1942.

In 1943, Tom Pullen wrote to Puller, then a lieutenant colonel fighting in the Pacific, to congratulate him on receiving his third Navy Cross for heroism during the battle for Henderson Field on Guadalcanal.

According to Jon Hoffman in his award-winning biography of Puller, “Chesty’s reply written in October 1943 never mentioned his own achievements, but applauded Pullen’s career as an educator, ‘I was delighted to hear from you and to learn that you have made a success of life: to my way of thinking the future of our country depends largely on our public

schools. As for me, I have been a Marine all these years and have a lovely wife and daughter.’”

Pullen visited Puller during a trip to New River, N.C., in May 1945. It was the first time he and Puller had seen one another in many years. Years later, recounting the visit in a letter to Burke Davis, Pullen wrote how he had intended to stop by for a brief visit, but ended up spending the entire day. In the same letter, Pullen acknowledges that he didn’t see Puller for several more years, but that he stopped to see him on numerous occasions after the general retired and settled into a home in Saluda, Va., not far from where he grew up in West Point.

As befitting his position and accomplishments as State Superintendent of Ed-

ucation, Dr. Pullen received several honorary degrees and numerous awards and honors, including having local schools and college facilities named in his honor. He also played an important but little-known role in facilitating the writing of what became a best-selling biography on his lifelong friend Lewis Puller, by then one of the Marine Corps’ most revered heroes.

According to Hoffman’s book, “Chesty,” in late 1959 Puller was interested in finding someone to collaborate with on his biography. Respected Civil War historian Burke Davis expressed an interest in working on the project, and was planning a trip to visit Puller while in the Tidewater area.

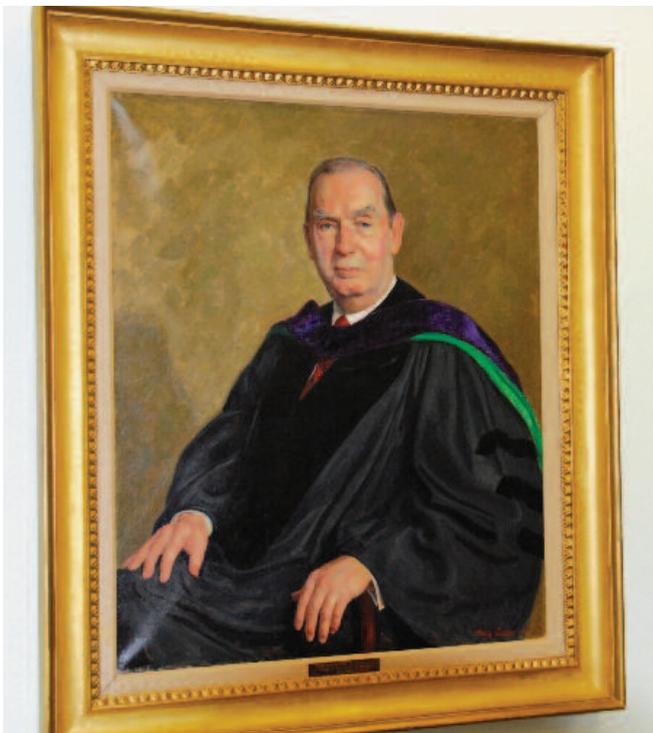
As Hoffman explains it: “Chesty also recently had received a gift from his old 3d OTC compatriot Tom Pullen. It was one of Davis’ well-regarded biographies of a Confederate general. When the author wrote Puller with the idea of doing a book, Davis found an eager reception. His stock only increased in Chesty’s eyes when the retired general found a reference to Major John W. Puller (an admired ancestor) in Davis’ volume on Jeb Stuart.”

Based on surviving correspondence between Pullen and Davis, they met at Davis’ home in Williamsburg, Va., to discuss the Puller book, and Pullen wrote Davis frequently, filling in details on Puller’s colorful life. One extraordinarily detailed piece of correspondence Pullen sent Davis is an 18-page typed memorandum of his personal recollections of his close association with Puller during their time together at boot camp, NCO School and the 3d OTC.

In a later letter, Pullen suggested the names of others the author might contact who also knew Puller during his formative years. Pullen also provided insight into Puller’s personal life, portraying Puller as a loyal family man and in one passage describing him taking up the collection at his church “as quietly and courteously as a banker vestryman.”

Pullen’s descriptions presented a far different picture of the revered general than his public image as a “Blood and Guts” combat hero. Davis’ book, “Marine,” was published in 1962, to the acclaim of Marines and critics alike. It went on to become a best-seller that is still available in paperback. A check of the book’s index reveals several quotes from Tom Pullen about their days together in the Marine Corps and from subsequent correspondence between the two.

During a well-deserved retirement after nearly 50 years as an educator, Tom Pullen answered the call of the University of Baltimore’s Board of Trustees to serve as the school’s president in 1964, soon after



DAVID H. HUGEL

Left: This oil portrait of Dr. Thomas G. Pullen Jr. hangs in the Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore.

Below: Marine recruits undergo training at the recruit depot at Paris Island, S.C., at the end of World War I (spelled Parris Island in 1919).



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stepping down as State Superintendent of Education. The university was a private school founded in 1925, offering liberal arts courses designed to meet the needs of the local business community, and an evening law-school program to accommodate students who worked and could not attend law school during the day.

Dr. Thomas Pullen served with distinction for more than five years after assuming the university's presidency, retiring on Nov. 1, 1969. His tenure is noted for his efforts to improve the school's academic standards and to expand the physical facilities of its growing urban campus. These steps laid a foundation for the college to join the state university system a few years later.

Just two weeks after Lieutenant General Puller's death in October 1971, Tom Pullen wrote a letter to his friend's widow, Virginia, enclosing a clipping from a Baltimore newspaper, which had interviewed him about his longtime friendship with the Marine icon. The article noted that Pullen recently had visited the ailing general at his home in Virginia.

Pullen apologized to Virginia Puller for perhaps not getting all the facts straight and for omitting points he should have raised, citing the fact that the reporter had called him while he was engaged in tap-

ing a local television station program, and he had not had a chance to properly prepare for the interview. He confessed to her, "I regret that I did not tell him something I thought important in Puller's career. He was very much like Stonewall Jackson in his tactics. I failed to tell him that Puller carried with him, according to

**The two men had served
together only briefly,
more than 50 years before,
but they remained friends
until Puller's death.**

his statement to me, a copy of Henderson's 'Stonewall Jackson.' I suppose this was his professional Bible, and perhaps this can explain many of his exploits and achievements."

The two men had served together only briefly, more than 50 years before, but they remained friends until Puller's death. Despite all he had achieved in life, at heart Tom Pullen was still a Marine. In a 1960 letter Pullen wrote, "If I had been offered

a permanent commission in the Marine Corps immediately after being commissioned, I should probably have taken it and spent my days in the service." He continued, "There is no question that 'Once a Marine Always a Marine,' but why? In retrospect, I am inclined to believe that I am more interested in having been a Marine and gotten out of the Corps than I would have been had I remained in it."

Editor's note: Dave Hugel enlisted in the Marine Corps following graduation from high school in 1960. During his four years on active duty he served as a photographer at MCAS, Quantico, Va., and later with the 1st MAW where he covered early Marine Corps operations in Vietnam while stationed in Da Nang as part of Operation Shufly.

Upon leaving active duty in 1964, he enrolled in the pre-law program at the University of Baltimore while working as a news cameraman and reporter for a Baltimore TV station. He received his law degree in 1973. Although Hugel knew Dr. Thomas Pullen during his term as university president, one of his major regrets is that he didn't learn of his friendship with Chesty Puller until after Puller's death.

