

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Charles Hayes
A Hero's Son

“You slime ball douche bag!!! What makes you think you are fit for my Marine Corps, the Marine Corps of Chesty Puller and other brave and honorable men!!? On your face, puke!! Push-ups!! Ready, begin!”

Those words were often heard from my boot camp drill instructor back then on Parris Island. For Lewis Burwell “Chesty” Puller, the most decorated Marine in history, a marine’s marine, was a standard that was often demanded of my aspirations. And aspire to it I did. At least until I got to Vietnam and a taste of what it was all about. Though even then there was a real part of Chesty Puller not far off. His son, Lt. Lewis Burwell Puller Jr., led a infantry rifle platoon there until he tripped a booby trapped howitzer shell and lost his right leg at the hip and his left leg below the knee as well as his left hand and most of his fingers on his right hand.

Barely able to survive and somewhat recover, he wrote in his Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, *Fortunate Son*, how his father, the iconic Marine, wept when he first saw him in the hospital. And how this hurt more than his horrific wounds. Some would say that he never got over it. But with guts, determination and the help of his wife and others he came back to raise a family, get a Law Degree, and approximate a normal life. But always there was the tug of the war and what it did to him and others. There was always a reality that could not dovetail with the awards and letters that he received. And the literature that he put forth. At the age of 48, after years of struggle and many failed attempts to resolve what *should be* with *what was*, Lewis B Puller Jr. ate his gun and was given a hero’s burial at Arlington Cemetery.

It is with no little sense of misgiving that I view the plethora of messages in our country that seem to indicate that donning a military uniform is little different from Clark Kent ripping off his suit in a phone booth. To me, these messages smack of a grooming process designed to cover up the obvious. When a simple soldier is gravely wounded, many times, he or she is paraded before us as if they were one of the Spartans of ancient Rome bound for glory. That by forfeiting pieces of their flesh, all is not lost, for heroes they have become.

Helping others to try and overcome severe destruction is a worthy cause, no doubt. But I can see in real time how much consideration is given to those shattered men and women when the footlights have dimmed and the wars have passed on to pretty ribbons and trinkets. Or when the adventure of a government shoot ‘em up has grown stale and the need to paint a picture of courage and glory for the masses has dwindled.

Throughout my life, with the passing of each new war, I have witnessed the avowed outrage over the care that the shattered ones have received from the same hands that provided them with armaments and a path to destruction. And each time I see the same promises wielded about when it comes to fixing a system that favors war with no consideration for its casualties. Yet each time it does not change and I wonder who can actu-

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ally believe that it ever will. This never ending cycle and its rotating rhetoric is like the catechism of some religions--lips move and the same old Hail Marys issue forth. *By rote.*

How can we honestly wonder at the number of suicides in the populations that take up our perpetual wars. How disillusioned it must have felt for Lewis B. Puller Jr, coming to a time like that with his privilege and myriad of resources. And still not able to pull it together. How much more so for the common soldier.

Maybe, just maybe, Lewis B. Puller Jr. and those like him in that land of loss, would be better off a tragedy that taugth and limped on, than a hero who inspired at the cost of themselves. May he and others at last rest in peace, be it Arlington or the grave plot on the ridge.