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Classmates Remember Lewis B. Puller, Jr. '67, J.D. '74

by Ann Gaudreaux | **December 3, 2010**

On Nov. 11, Veterans Day, the William & Mary Law School community gathered to celebrate the naming of the **Veterans Benefits Clinic** in honor of alumnus Lewis B. Puller, Jr., B.A. '67, 'J.D. '74. The naming was made possible, in part, by the generosity of Puller's classmates in the Law School Class of 1974, who decided to honor his memory and to support the VBC's work with monies raised during their 35th reunion gift drive.

Lewis B. Puller, Jr. (1945-1994) was an attorney, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. After graduating from the College of William & Mary in 1967, he joined the Marines. He was sent to Vietnam as a second lieutenant in 1968, where he was badly wounded when he tripped a booby-trapped Howitzer round. Puller earned his J.D. in 1974 at William & Mary Law School. In 1991, he told the story of his life in a book titled "Fortunate Son: The Healing of a Vietnam Vet." For his writing, he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for autobiography/biography. Puller was the son of General Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, the most highly decorated Marine in the Corps' history.

The co-chairs of the Class of 1974 Reunion Committee, Paul Clifford, Greg Giordano, and Walter Stowe shared their thoughts about their Law School classmate and friend for this article. Several more classmates -- from both the College and the Law School -- Bob Johnston, Jim Lewis, Ross Lloyd, Jim Murray, and Julian Raney, also contributed memories of their friend.

Puller's Law School classmates each recalled how every member of the class took turns assisting Puller in his wheelchair so that he could get to class in Tucker Hall, which was then inaccessible to those with physical disabilities.

Clifford, J.D. '74, now a law firm consultant at Law Practice Consultants, LLC, after 30 years as a corporate lawyer in Boston, Mass., is also a Vietnam War veteran, having served as a U.S. Army advisor to a Vietnamese Army psychological warfare unit. Clifford said that all the Vietnam vets bonded during their Law School years, and Puller was a big part of that.

"Despite his many wounds and ailments, Lewis was quick to smile, always participated in the many social activities we had, and always wanted to give back, as he showed with the Vietnam Children's Fund project many years later," he said.

"For our 35th reunion gift, we spoke about doing something unique for the Law School. As chairs of our Reunion Committee we spoke with Sally Kellam, Associate Dean for Development and Alumni Affairs, and Laura Beach, Director for Reunion Giving, about combining our class gift with a way to honor Lewis," Clifford said. "They suggested a naming opportunity for the Veterans Benefits Clinic as a way to personalize the clinic and honor a well-loved military veteran from our class. We agreed, and think Lewis would be pleased."

Greg Giordano, J.D. '74, of Counsel at Troutman Sanders LLP in Virginia Beach, specializes in labor and employment law. He remembered going to the Puller home to play cards. He was also a member, with Puller, of "The Budding Barristers," a group of law students who met regularly on Friday nights to socialize and commiserate. "Lew would always be there," Giordano said.

Walter Stowe, J.D. '74, is a consultant in the gaming industry and former General Counsel with Elixir Gaming Technologies in Las Vegas, Nev. He previously worked for 26 years for the FBI, where he served with many former Marines. One of Stowe's co-workers was the medivac pilot who

airlifted Puller after he was injured. He clearly remembered the scene, and Puller's wounds. The pilot found out the next day that Puller was the son of Marine General Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller; his battalion sergeant major personally thanked him for getting Puller out of the field.

Stowe said that the Reunion Committee was gratified to have so many members of the class get behind this project.

"About 25- to 30-percent of our classmates were Vietnam vets so the founding of the VBC, and the suggestion to name it for Lewis, was an idea that we jumped on," Stowe said. "Lewis was a great example of the sacrifices that people made during wartime and afterward, and his story is compelling."

"During the winter of our 1L year (1972), I remember one day feeling very sorry for myself over some small issue," Stowe continued. "Then Lewis drove by me and parked his car in the space reserved for him behind the old Law School, threw out his wheelchair, and jumped into it, wheeling himself over to the steps and waiting for help, as he did every day. My problems disappeared. He was such a pleasant and outgoing guy who lived with the hand he was dealt. He was just like any other law student."

Bob Johnston, J.D. '75, who lives in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, is retired from 30 plus years of trial practice in the Washington, DC, area. He knew Puller from their undergraduate days; their fraternity houses were adjacent to each other, and they had many mutual friends.

"We all played poker together and Lewis liked to party," Johnston said. "He had a sharp wit, and a sharp tongue on occasion. One night Lewis suffered a cut on one of his legs, and I drove him to the Williamsburg Hospital emergency room for treatment. He had a plucky spirit that had him wisecracking with the nurse who was stitching him up."

"After graduation, from college, I went to Army Infantry Officer Candidate School," Johnston said, "and trained for service like Lew's in Vietnam. Luckily I was commissioned as a supply officer, and I was assigned to Ft. Belvoir, Va., where the Executive Officer of my command there was Col. Robert G. Todd. At Col. Todd's retirement party in 1971, I saw Lewis for the first time since that trip to the hospital in Williamsburg. He arrived with his wife, Linda Todd 'Toddy' Puller, the colonel's daughter, and Lewis was in a wheelchair, having lost his legs in the war. I later went to war as a rear echelon supply officer, and felt lucky every day I was there not to have been in the jungles and rice paddies as Lewis was."

"Lewis graduated a year ahead of me from Law School," Johnston continued, "but I followed his career -- his run for Congress, his book and Pulitzer Prize -- and I wrote to congratulate him when he received his award. I was so sad when he died, and I attended his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. It took me a long time to read his book."

"There were many casualties in Vietnam. For some of us, Vietnam was just a delay in our careers," Johnston added, "but to others, the war took so much more. The same plucky spirit that Lewis showed in college enabled him to make something of himself when he returned. He was not a macho man or a great athlete, but he had a spirit. Unfortunately, his spirit eventually ran out."

Jim Lewis, B.A. '67, J.D. '74, is a retired U.S. Navy Captain. He served as his town's mayor in Oregon for 14 years and was recently a candidate for City Council. He and Puller were undergraduate friends as well, both English majors and in the same dormitory at the College of William & Mary their sophomore and junior years. Lewis remembered many all-night bridge games.

"In Law School, Lewis had a wooden tray to hold his cards since he was missing so many fingers," Lewis said. "He and Toddy had the nicest house of any of us and they frequently hosted parties. We were both members of the 'Budding Barristers', many of whom were Vietnam vets, and we partied all three years."

Ross Lloyd, J.D. '74, is an attorney with Weinstein, Schleifer & Kupersmith in Philadelphia, as well as a fellow Marine and Vietnam veteran. He and a friend housesat in the Puller's Alexandria home when they moved to Saluda so Puller could run for Congress.

"For me as a fellow veteran, seeing what Puller went through, I consider my Vietnam experience to be a 'cakewalk,'" Lloyd said. "His courage and refusal to complain, to go forward, and to live his life as best he could, allowed him to be upbeat and a pleasure to be around. And Toddy, his wife, was a wonderful lady."

After graduation from the Law School, Lloyd and Puller searched for jobs. Puller eventually got a job at the Department of Defense, and Lloyd moved to Massachusetts before landing in Pennsylvania, and they lost frequent contact.

"When he died in 1994, I couldn't bring myself to attend the funeral," Lloyd said, "but I know it was attended by many dignitaries. He cast a long shadow."

Jim Murray, J.D. '74, heads up Court Square Ventures, a venture capital firm, in Charlottesville, Va. He remembered that many members of their Law School class were Vietnam vets, but none seemed as permanently affected by their service as Puller.

"He was completely self-reliant, and few class members were as popular as he was," Murray said. "Lewis was a genuinely nice guy with a great sense of humor, and everyone liked him. At most, 5- or 10-percent of our class were married with children. Not only was Lewis disabled, but when he returned home each evening to study, he had the additional responsibility of two small children in the house."

"Lewis and Toddy were wonderful hosts, and they enjoyed hosting parties at their home," Murray added. "I stayed in touch with him through the years, and I was at his home drinking Diet Pepsi with him the night he won his Pulitzer Prize."

The Honorable Julian Raney, J.D. '74, is a retired judge who served in the General District Court in Roanoke, Va.

"I have only one memory of Lewis that I will share," Raney said. "My best memory of Lewis is seeing him out of his wheelchair at a party, rapidly and happily propelling himself around the room on his hands. He made you disregard his disability."

In his book, "Fortunate Son: the Healing of a Vietnam Vet," Puller cited several William & Mary faculty and administrators who helped him along the way, including Jim Kelly, former Marine and now-retired assistant to several of the College's presidents, who was a mentor during Puller's College and Law School years; John Donaldson of the Law School faculty, now Professor Emeritus; Law Professor Dick Williamson, deceased, who helped Puller file Federal Election Commission and financial paperwork during his Congressional campaign; and Law Professor, former Dean of the Law School and William & Mary President Timothy J. Sullivan, who served as campaign advisor, and helped Puller write his speeches, and articulate his ideas.

In 1993, Puller returned to Vietnam, looking for ways to both honor and to give back to the people who had lost so much during that war. As the inspiration for the Vietnam Children's Fund, Puller and several others, such as journalist, and fellow veteran Terry Anderson, and actress Kieu Chinh, decided the best monument they could create would be to build schools for Vietnamese children.

At the time of Puller's death in 1994, Anderson wrote in the *Washington Post*, "What of Lew himself? His search for personal healing brought healing to others here, through his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Fortunate Son." And it led him to attempt a much greater healing, between America and Vietnam. As a director of the Vietnamese Children's Fund, he worked hard for reconciliation between the two peoples, and helped conceive its main project -- a living memorial

to the two million men, women and children who died in Vietnam, in the form of several schools to be built in Quang Tri Province, the poorest in the country. He went back to Vietnam and chose spots for the first school, raised money toward its construction and was on the verge of seeing ground broken."

Since Puller's death, 41 schools have been built throughout Vietnam. Each day, 58,000 children are being taught, including those at the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. School in Dong Ha, the capital of Quang Tri Province on the former DMZ (demilitarized zone).