

American records ROK-US friendship

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Ned Forney, holds up a photograph of himself, Dr. Hyun Bon-hak, and his son Ben Forney at his grandfather Colonel Edward H. Forney's gravesite at the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, in 2000. Hyun worked with Col. Forney in the Heungnam Evacuation during the Korean War (1950-1953). / Courtesy of Ned Forney

By Kim Bo-eun

Ned Forney's story is not the typical depiction of a grandfather, who served as a heroic colonel of the U.S. Marine Corps here during the Korean War (1950-1953).

Forney, 53, did not grow up hearing about the extraordinary tales of his grandfather commanding forces during war — in fact, he knew little about him. Not only did Colonel Edward H. Forney die when his grandson was two years old; the family just didn't talk much about him.

An impromptu meeting in Seoul in 1998 became a life-changing event for Forney. As a high school history teacher in the United States, he was accepted for a program offered by the Korean Society, a U.S.-based non-profit organization promoting bilateral exchange.

When Forney arrived in Seoul, he was contacted by Dr. Hyun Bong-hak, who is recognized here for his contributions as a doctor during the Korean War. Hyun had worked closely with Col. Forney, and after losing contact with him, had sought for decades to find connections to his family. The late Forney passed away in 1965.

Through Hyun, Forney learned about the Heungnam Evacuation, in which U.S. and Korean troops pulled out of North Korea's then-eastern coastal province to escape Chinese forces that joined in the war in December 1950. At the time, Hyun and Col. Forney led some 14,000 refugees to the South — which is depicted in a scene in the 2014 box-office hit "Ode to My Father."

Col. Forney served as advisor to the Republic of Korea (ROK) Marine Corps from 1957 to 1959 and then went back to his home country.

After Forney returned to the U.S., Hyun paid a visit, for a KBS documentary titled "Hyun Bong-hak, the Korean Schindler." Forney, his son and Hyun met at the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, where Col. Forney is buried, for the filming. Hyun passed away in 2007.

Forney returned to teaching, but in 2015 came back to start writing a book on his grandfather, Hyun and the Heungnam Evacuation.

With help from the Korean government and a local church, he has interviewed 26 surviving refugees, who have relayed tearful memories of the event.

"They have told me amazing, heartbreaking stories of leaving their families behind," Forney said in an interview in downtown Seoul, Tuesday.

Forney acknowledges the reality of the publishing market, which is why he aims to put together a captivating and accurate compilation.

"People do not buy books about the Korean War — they are not interested," he said.

"However, I have a huge task, obligation and commitment to Dr. Hyun, my grandfather, the people who served and the refugees, to tell this story and to tell it well."

"The book's theme is the Korean-American friendship, not only between two men, between the families but also between the two countries," he added.

Also as a high school history teacher of 25 years, Forney stresses the importance of knowing about one's history.

"Your family's history is part of your history, your community's history, your country's history — which is something I have always told my students," he said.

Forney lives in Korea with his wife and son. His son, Ben, 29, who also developed an interest in Korea, earned a Korean language certificate from Yonsei University and a master's degree from Seoul National University and currently works at the Asan Policy Institute on North Korean issues.

When he is not researching and writing, Forney enjoys going out to eat Korean food, hiking and biking in the city.

“I love Korea, its people and its culture and Seoul's energy,” he said.

Forney, who is originally from Charleston, South Carolina, says he would be happy to stay in Korea, hoping to find a teaching position after he publishes his book next year in the U.S.