

[Ned Forney] One man's difference

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Throughout Korea's long and proud existence, its people have witnessed remarkable triumphs and tragedies. While some eras of Korean history are remembered more fondly or sadly than others, one period stands out as the most tumultuous and heroic. The 20th century.



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In a span of less than 100 years, from the early 1900's to the late 1980's, Korea moved from an agrarian, largely isolated kingdom to a modern and democratic nation with the world's 13th-largest economy. During this time it also experienced the hardships of Japanese colonization and the ravages of war, making it the only country to experience such a profound and painful transformation in such a short period.

But Korea's history is about more than just events. In good times and bad, Korean people have shaped their country's destiny and molded its principles. Koreans doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons, have made a lasting impact on the nation and its institutions. Dr. Hyun Bong-hak is one such patriot.

Born in 1922, Hyun grew up in a Christian family in Hamheung, Hamgyong Province, in present day North Korea, graduated from high school there in 1941, and received his medical degree in 1945 from Severance Union Medical College -- today the Yonsei University College of Medicine.

In 1947, Hyun received a scholarship to attend the Medical College of Virginia (Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine) in Richmond, Virginia, and through generous financial support of American Methodist missionaries in Korea and America, spent the next three years in the United States learning English and obtaining a degree in Clinical Pathology.

Hyun returned to Seoul just months prior to North Korea's invasion of the newly formed Republic of Korea, and by the end of June 1950, he, like hundreds of thousands of other Koreans, was homeless and fleeing for his life. But that was all about to change.

Hyun's actions over the ensuing six months would help transform Korea and save over 92,000 lives.

In late July 1950, Hyun became an English interpreter and doctor for the ROK Marines, where he participated in numerous combat operations and administered medical aid to countless Marines and soldiers. After one battle, Hyun pumped blood from his own arm

directly into the arm of a critically wounded Marine. The unorthodox and dangerous procedure saved the young man's life.

By October, however, Hyun was once again in North Korea. Appointed as a civil affairs officer by Gen. Ned Almond, the commanding general of the US Army's X Corps, Hyun, in a strange twist of fate, now found himself stationed in his hometown of Hamheung.

With the tragic and devastating battle of Chosin Reservoir (known as Changjin in Korean) unfolding from late November into early December 1950, UN Forces had retreated to Heungnam, where they now hoped to evacuate to the South by sea. MacArthur had made the decision to regroup below the 38th parallel and wanted every US, South Korean, and British soldier and marine (and all their equipment and supplies) out of harm's way.

But there were also tens of thousands of trapped North Koreans at Heungnam. Hyun became their advocate. Over the next two weeks, he pleaded for the US military to include the refugees -- all of them -- in the evacuation plan and tirelessly met with Korean and American generals and staff officers, including Col. Edward H. Forney, USMC, X Corps' evacuation officer, to persuade them of the urgency and importance of saving his countrymen. If left behind, the Communists would almost certainly kill them, he told the Americans.

He also met daily with men, women, and children freezing at the water's edge, assuring them they would not be forgotten. On one frightfully cold night, he even risked his life to make a trip to Hamheung to spread the word of a train that would soon be leaving to take civilians safely to Heungnam. As Hyun drove frantically through the streets of the city alerting its residents of the approaching Chinese army and the departing train, hundreds of Christians in a downtown church heard Hyun's good news, boarded the train, and were saved from the impending onslaught. They began calling him "Moses." The name stuck.

Hyun's dedication to the refugees, and unwavering faith in his fellow man and God, eventually prevailed. In late December, a decision was made to save as many refugees as possible. It was now up to Forney and US Adm. James Doyle to load thousands of North Korean civilians aboard the ships. Most were crammed on, in, under, and between tanks, trucks, jeeps, and pallets of gear and equipment. It didn't matter; they were escaping to freedom.

On Christmas Eve, 1950, the last vessels pulled out of Heungnam, ending one of the most dramatic events of the Korean War.

Hyun -- just one man in a sea of misery, and in many cases, lost hope -- had made a difference. It is estimated that nearly 1 million descendants of the Heungnam refugees now live in freedom in South Korea, the US, Canada, and other countries throughout the world.

Over the years, Hyun's heroic actions were largely forgotten until, in 1998, documentary film producer Lee Eun-taek released "Hyun Bong-hak, the Korean Schindler." The film was a

resounding success and brought the Heungnam Evacuation to life for a new generation of Koreans and Americans.

More recently, the record-setting movie, “Ode to My Father,” showcased the evacuation, placing Hyun in the spotlight for millions of Koreans who watched the blockbuster. At the beginning of the film, the actor playing the 28-year-old Hyun pleads with an American officer, “Please sir, you must save them. They will die if left behind.” Seconds later the screen is filled with thousands of refugees boarding ships.

On Dec. 19, at 3 p.m., a statue commemorating the life of the late Dr. Hyun Bong-hak will be unveiled in front of the Severance Building near Seoul Station, and the public is invited to attend the ceremony.

The statue will be a lasting and appropriate memorial to Hyun’s heroic actions during the Korean War and will also be a fitting tribute to the refugees who risked their lives to escape Communist oppression. Most importantly, however, it will be a reminder to all Koreans that one man can make a difference.

By Ned Forney

Ned Forney lives in Seoul and is currently writing a book on Dr. Hyun Bong-hak, Col. Edward H. Forney (his grandfather), and the Heungnam Evacuation. He can be reached at Ned.Forney1985@gmail.com. —Ed.

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