

[Ned Forney] The better angels of our nature

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With only a few days left before Christmas and the New Year, people around the world -- regardless of race or religion -- are busy preparing for celebrations, festivals, and family gatherings. It's a special time to be with loved ones, share blessings, and reminisce. But as we enjoy the holiday season, it's easy to forget about those who have lost one of the foundations of humanity's very existence -- place.

Whether it's a metropolis of 20 million, a coastal hamlet, or a mountain village, the place we live -- where our parents, grandparents, and children live -- is an anchor providing stability and strength. Our community gives us identity.



NED FORNEY

However, for millions of people -- refugees -- the sanctuary of home is only a memory.

The sudden transformation from citizen to refugee occurs all too frequently in our modern, ever-changing world, but this is not an exclusively 21st-century phenomenon. Refugees have been with us since biblical times, a stark reminder of what happens when natural disasters, ethnic strife, and wars ravage the land. With social media and instantaneous news feeds now the norm, the traumatic and life-changing experience of waking up without a home, or a country, becomes a public affair with profound familial and societal consequences.

How we view this refugee "problem" -- and the way governments and individuals respond to it -- has historical and far-reaching implications. A rescue operation that occurred 65 years ago this month is a perfect example.

Heungnam, North Korea, 1950

In December 1950, dramatic events taking place in the rugged mountains of North Korea captivated the world's attention. The Chosin Reservoir campaign, one of the fiercest battles in U.S. history, was taking place in sub-zero temperatures and knee-deep snow. As U.N. forces, including the 1st Marine Division, 31st Regimental Combat Team, and 41 Royal Commando, fought against overwhelming Chinese forces in an attempt to break out from the Chosin reservoir and reach the coast, tens of thousands of men, women, and children

were on the move.

With a few personal possessions – and in some cases, babies – strapped to their backs, these farmers, shopkeepers, doctors, factory workers, mothers, students and everyday citizens of villages and towns surrounding Chosin and Heungnam hugged their relatives, promised they'd return in a few days, and began walking toward the ocean, following closely behind the retreating U.S. Marines and soldiers.

Leaving their homes and extended families, they were hoping to escape Chinese forces attacking from the north. Having lived under communist rule for five years, these North Korean civilians had seen the Chinese and North Korean armies exacting revenge on “sympathizers.” Those who had collaborated with the South Korean and U.S. military were tortured, imprisoned, and killed. The refugees fleeing toward Heungnam feared for their lives and were hoping the Americans would allow them to board ships heading south – to freedom.

By Dec. 10, the U.N. forces – with the Chinese in close pursuit – had escaped the Chosin trap and were arriving in Heungnam. Over 100 U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine ships were waiting. Gen. MacArthur had ordered all U.N. Forces to evacuate from Heungnam for redeployment to South Korea. Nearly 100,000 North Korean refugees were now also flooding into Heungnam.

For American military leaders in Tokyo – where MacArthur had his headquarters – and Washington D.C., the fate of the refugees at Heungnam presented a serious dilemma. There was no space for civilians aboard military ships, and even if special arrangements could be made to embark the refugees, there simply weren't enough vessels. To make matters worse, U.S. military personnel had caught numerous enemy soldiers posing as refugees. Even a single North Korean saboteur with a few explosives could wreak havoc aboard a packed Navy troop carrier.

MacArthur and the U.S. generals in the Pentagon contemplated their options – and waited.

In a glimmer of hope for the hungry, freezing refugees huddled at the water's edge, a relatively small number were loaded on ships during the second week of December. Plans had also been made to evacuate, if the Chinese didn't attack and enough shipping was available, 25,000 additional refugees. What would happen to the tens of thousands of refugees still stranded at Heungnam, however, remained uncertain.

As military personnel – and their equipment – withdrew throughout December, the refugees, waiting patiently in the frigid cold, grew increasingly fearful. With Dec. 24, the evacuation deadline, quickly approaching, it didn't look good – and the Chinese were getting closer by the day.

Finally, after much prodding and insistence on behalf of the refugees by key members of the military at Heungnam – specifically a Korean civil affairs officer, Dr. Hyun Bong-hak; the

officer in command of the evacuation, Col. Edward H. Forney, USMC; and the commanding officer of X Corps, Gen. Ned Almond – a decision was made. Discussed by members of the National Security Council and Joint Chiefs of Staff, it was decided that the remaining refugees – all of them – would be evacuated from Heungnam. The U.S. government, in an unprecedented move to save civilians under pressure from enemy attack, had made the right call.

Miracle on Christmas Eve

On Christmas Eve, the last of the refugees boarded a Merchant Marine vessel, the SS Meredith Victory. The cargo ship, designed to carry less than 60 people, sailed from Heungnam with 14,000 refugees, often referred to as the greatest rescue operation ever by a single ship. Bob Lunney, a 23-year-old crewman aboard the Meredith Victory, said years later when asked about the ship's historic voyage, "(War) is also about preserving the integrity of a nation and the dignity of its people – we felt we had done that."

Ninety-two thousand North Korean men, women, and children were rescued at Heungnam. Today it is estimated that over a million descendants of these refugees now live in freedom in the Republic of Korea, the U. S., and countless countries around the world. In the largest seaborne military evacuation of civilians in the history of the U.S., our government set a humanitarian precedent that resonates to this day. "The better angels of our nature" had prevailed.

By Ned Forney

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