

Remembering Hyun Bong-hak

By Esther Kyongsun Hyun &
Helen Kyungeun Hyun-Bowlin

When we were little, Christmas meant decorating the tree, making holiday cookies, singing Christmas carols while our older sister played the piano, and most of all, receiving presents from Santa Claus.

By the time we were adolescents, Christmas became more like Thanksgiving — a time for reflection and gratefulness. Our father, the late Dr. Hyun Bong-hak, always brought home foreign students who didn't have a place to go for the holidays.

Our father didn't talk about growing up in Korea — other than telling us he was poor and had to walk miles to school in cold weather. It wasn't until years later that we discovered that he conceived of the Heungnam Evacuation, which saved the lives of 100,000 civilians.

During the Korean War, our father served as a civil affairs Adviser to Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond to help rebuild Hamheung, North Korea. Christianity had a strong foothold in Hamheung, so when the Americans liberated Hamheung from the communists, they were embraced by the locals.

Shortly thereafter, the U.N. forces began to retreat. This was



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disastrous for the Christians, local government leaders and anyone working for the U.N. Forces, as all would be tortured and massacred by the communists. Our father advocated for a civilian evacuation, stating, "It didn't seem fair to me that those who had risked communist retaliation by cooperating with the Americans should

be abandoned so readily."

He received constant encouragement from Col. Edward R. Forney, the foremost amphibious expert at the time who masterfully plotted out how the evacuation would be implemented; and together, they met with Gen. Almond several times. Gen. Almond approved of the mission with a planned evacuation of 4,000-5,000 civilians from Hamheung to Heungnam by train.

The Hamheung railroad station was flooded with more than 50,000 people. Over 100,000 arrived at Heungnam Port circumventing the roads, which were reserved for military personnel and closely monitored by MPs. Blankets and rice were given to the refugees who remained at the port in minus 10 degrees Celsius weather.

The Meredith Victory was the last ship to leave the Heungnam Harbor, which was rife with mines. Designed to carry 12 passengers with a 47-person crew, it brought 14,000 refugees to safety and ultimately made it into the Guinness World Records as "the largest evacuation from land by a single ship." The port was blown up to render it useless to the communist forces. Many civilians who should have been evacuated were left behind.

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Our family appreciates the immense efforts of Yonsei University and all the organizations associated with honoring Dr. Hyun Bong-hak's humanitarian deeds. His grandchildren are proud of his heroism, and we hope future generations in Korea will remember what he and countless others, including our beloved Uncle Hyun Si-hak, did for their country.

Esther Kyongsun Hyun is the second daughter of the late Dr. Hyun Bong-hak. She is a Certified autism specialist and special education teacher with the Los Angeles Unified School District. Helen Kyungeun Hyun-Bowlin is Dr. Hyun's third daughter. She resides in New Jersey and is a national-level figure skating coach. They sent this article to The Korea Herald after visiting South Korea to attend events paying respects to their late father, who played a crucial role in the Heungnam evacuation during the Korean War, which is portrayed in the box-office hit "Ode to My Father."
— Ed.