

My grandfather's legacy

2018-06-29 : 15:09

By Jimmy Doyle

General Douglas MacArthur remains a larger-than-life figure and war hero in the eyes of many Americans and Koreans. But without the U.S. Navy and my grandfather, our Marines could not have stormed the Korean Peninsula in the early 1950s.

It took senior Naval officers with extensive experience in planning, staging and executing a sea assault to carry out the landing at Incheon and, months later, the Hungnam withdrawal.

Amphibious landings, with their combined use of land, sea and air power, are among the most complex military operations. It was no accident that my grandfather, Rear Admiral James Henry Doyle — commander of Amphibious Forces, Far East — knew how to lead the attack at Incheon. During World War II, he had led amphibious forces, most notably at Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the Solomons campaign.



MacArthur chose Incheon as the site for a sea assault in the hopes of cutting enemy supply lines. Incheon is only 15 miles from Seoul, yet at that time was deep in enemy-held territory. In a stroke of genius, MacArthur reasoned that North Korea's top brass would consider a landing at Incheon incredibly foolish, and thus be taken by surprise.

Natural hazards, especially the Yellow Sea's swift currents and extreme tides, made landing at Incheon at the height of typhoon season one of the most daring gambles in military history. But Admiral Doyle advised MacArthur that such a high-risk assault was “not impossible.”

Doyle drew up plans for the landing, which called for widespread shelling and initial assault on Wolmi Island before establishing beachheads closer to Incheon. For two days, destroyers and cruisers pounded the shoreline, as well as Gunsan and Pyongyang — bombarding shore batteries and other targets to confuse the enemy.

Doyle launched the attack at high tide on the afternoon of Sept. 15, 1950, from his flagship, the USS Mount McKinley. An armada of 261 Navy vessels and 75,000 troops made the assault. Doyle's warships provided close air support for the soldiers who climbed over Incheon's tall sea walls that day. The capture of the port served its purpose of cutting enemy supply lines and, 10 days later, the capture of Seoul — temporarily turning the war's tide in favor of U.N. forces.

Three months later, at another key turning point in the war, Admiral Doyle commanded the emergency evacuation of U.N. forces from the North Korean port of Hungnam. The Chinese, who had entered the war,

almost trapped Marines and South Korean troops near Chosin Reservoir as they retreated through the mountains in sub-zero temperatures and blinding snowstorms.

Hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees also joined the exodus, streaming toward Hungnam in hopes of escape. Some yearned for religious or political freedom. Others feared execution or years of forced labor. Many died en route from starvation and frostbite.

For 15 days in December 1950, Navy and merchant vessels evacuated 105,000 soldiers and 350,000 tons of supplies and equipment at Hungnam under live fire. More than 98,000 refugees were transported hundreds of miles south, mainly to Busan and Geoje Island, where they began new lives. President Moon Jae-in is the son of refugees.

You've no doubt heard stories about the voyage of the merchant vessel SS Meredith Victory, carrying 14,000 refugees through perilous seas to freedom. But how did the other refugees escape? Put simply, they did not swim. My grandfather, working with Marine Colonel Edward H. Forney who managed the port of Hungnam, deployed hundreds of warships and merchant vessels to create a sea lift to rescue as many civilians as possible. He distributed rice and ordered the bakeries of naval warships to make bread for civilians ashore.

With 25,000 refugees aboard those ships, Admiral Doyle was authorized by Far East Command in Tokyo to shut down his efforts and blow up the port before the Chinese arrived. Instead, he and Colonel Forney continued to evacuate tens of thousands of civilians until Christmas Eve.

For his heroism, brilliant tactics and courage, both at Incheon and Hungnam, the U.S. Navy honored my grandfather by naming one of its warships the USS Doyle.

Nicknamed Jimmy, my grandfather was the son of a New York City clerk. He was born on Long Island, and as a teen he was a curtain-puller at the New York Metropolitan Opera. He graduated in the U.S. Naval Academy's class of 1920, and earned a law degree at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He found his sea legs on battleships and destroyers. He also served ashore for the Navy's judge advocate general and later at our military office at the then-fledgling United Nations in New York.

It's no secret that war brings out man's best and worst. The Korean War was no exception. Acts of valor and sacrifice were common in the crucible of that war, so were war crimes and acts of callous indifference. I'm proud I am the namesake of a man who, when his war-fighting experience and commitment to international law and the Geneva Conventions came to bear, chose to "do the right thing" in Hungnam by rescuing as many noncombatants as possible.

After the war, Vice Admiral Doyle settled in Texas, where he practiced law. His admirers called him "the admiral" _ even when he wasn't wearing a uniform. A natural-born raconteur, my grandfather told vivid stories about his exploits, but he didn't talk much about the horrors of war until he drew close to death in 1981. He'd quietly lived with the scars of battle, having seen up-close too many casualties and made too many life-and-death decisions.

Regrettably, he wasn't able to return to Korea during his lifetime. If he were here with us today, I'm certain he would be impressed by Korea's miraculous transformation since the war and the resilience of its people, yet also sad to know the Korean Peninsula still claims the world's most heavily fortified border.

He'd be dismayed that North Korean citizens live like slaves in a totalitarian state, and troubled by its rulers' diehard efforts to build weapons of mass destruction. He'd question why, nearly 70 years after an armistice was signed in 1953, the two Koreas still live on a knife's edge.

As a working international lawyer, he'd strive to ease tensions and animosities. But first, Admiral Doyle would stop in his tracks and look you in the eyes. He'd salute you and your families for your bravery and your faith and urge all of you to explore new ways to bring a lasting peace to this region.

Jimmy Doyle, a veteran American journalist, is the grandson and namesake of Admiral Doyle, who died in San Francisco in 1981. He is visiting Seoul for the first time.