

*The Hungnam Evacuation:
A Korean War Christmas Miracle*

Ned Forney

Chosin, North Korea, 1950

Beginning in late November 1950, the world's attention focused on a little-known reservoir in North Korea's Taebaek Mountain Range: Chosin or Changjin Reservoir. The battle taking place there, one of the fiercest in U.S. history, was being fought in sub-zero temperatures, gale-force winds, and knee-deep snow. The Taebaek Mountains, a formidable expanse of steep, rocky, and unforgiving peaks and valleys, which in the words of US Marine General Oliver P. Smith "were never intended for military operations,"¹ would prove to be a merciless killing ground for both UN and Chinese troops.

By early December, U.N. troops, specifically 1st Marine Division, 31st Regimental Combat Team, 41 Royal Commando and attached ROK soldiers, were surrounded by overwhelming Chinese forces. Suffering from the cold weather and nightly attacks, hundreds of men were dying daily. Weeks earlier General Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief of UN Forces (UNCOM), and General Edward Almond, the US Army X Corps Commander, had received intelligence reports of large Chinese units crossing the border into North Korea, but both men refused to believe, or as some historians say, chose to ignore, the facts on the ground.

Mao Zedong's repeated warnings to stay clear of China had gone unheeded, and the UN now found itself fighting a Chinese army four times its size. MacArthur's "home by Christmas" offensive had come to an ignominious end.

What happened over the next ten days shocked the world. The 1st Marine Division, led by General Oliver P. Smith, did what most people thought was impossible. Against all odds, the Marines broke out of the Chosin trap and made their way to Hungnam, a port on North Korea's east coast. Fighting the Chinese and the brutal cold every step of the way, acts

¹ David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, Hyperion Books, 2007, p. 431

of extraordinary sacrifice, courage, and perseverance became commonplace.² The epic “breakout” to the sea would make headlines around the world and arguably save the UN from a catastrophic defeat.

On December 9, 1950, after days of vicious fighting along the MSR, a narrow, ice and snow-covered dirt road leading to Hungnam, the last Marines arrived in Hungnam and soon began embarking for Busan. X Corps had been ordered to redeploy to the South to begin preparing for the defense of Seoul.

The Refugees

But while US Marines and soldiers were withdrawing to the coast and beginning their amphibious evacuation, another story was developing. Tens of thousands of desperate and terrified North Korean civilians were also making their way to the sea. The *largest military amphibious evacuation of civilians, under combat conditions, in American history* was about to take place.



Refugees making their way to Hungnam.
(photo credit: public domain)

Refugees from countless North Korean villages, towns, and farms were on the move. With personal possessions – clothes, housewares, family heirlooms, occasionally even babies – strapped to their backs, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, wives and husbands were making their way through snow-covered roads, treacherous mountain passes, and enemy-occupied territory. They had hugged their relatives,

² Nearly 18,000 Americans were killed, wounded, or missing in action, with an estimated 60,000 Chinese casualties.

promised to return in a few days, and said good-bye. For most, it was the last time they would see their families.

With the land route to the South blocked, the refugees were hoping to make it to Hungnam, where they heard US Navy and Merchant Marine ships were waiting to take them to freedom. Cold, hungry, and exhausted, they pressed on, knowing they would be imprisoned, tortured, or executed if caught by North Korean or Chinese Communists.

For many of the refugees, suffering from harsh winter conditions and caught between attacking Chinese troops and retreating UN forces, their journey ended tragically. Thousands perished. Over the next few weeks, untold numbers of civilians from northeastern Korea would die from exposure and enemy/friendly fire.

For those who did survive the exodus to Hungnam, however, the sight of U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine vessels greeted them upon their arrival. But as they soon realized, the ships weren't loading civilians. MacArthur had ordered all U.N. troops and their equipment, supplies, and vehicles to leave first. The refugees were at the bottom of the priority list and would have to wait.



Colonel Edward H. Forney, USMC, at Inchon Landing, September, 1950.
(Photo credit: Ned Forney)

The Evacuation

Marine Colonel Edward H. Forney, the Deputy Chief of Staff of X Corps and the man in charge of the withdrawal, immediately went to work loading men and equipment. Appointed by Gen. Almond as the

evacuation control officer, Forney was “responsible for operating the port, withdrawing units to the staging areas, embarking the troops, loading supplies and evacuating the refugees.”³□ There was little time to waste.

A World War II veteran and one of the Marine Corps’ top amphibious experts, Forney had arrived in Japan nine months earlier to train US Army personnel in ship-to-shore operations. He played a part in the Inchon and Wonsan Landings and would now be accountable for withdrawing over 125,000 troops, 17,500 vehicles, and 350,000 tons of military materiel from Hungnam.⁴

Rear Admiral James H. Doyle, Commander of Task Force 90, the huge armada of ships assigned to evacuate X Corps from Hungnam to Busan, would also play an immensely important role in the operation. As one of the US Navy’s most respected World War II amphibious warfare officers, Doyle had been put in charge of planning and executing the attack on Inchon and the landing at Wonsan. As the senior Naval officer at Hungnam, he was now responsible for everything that did or didn’t happen in the port and surrounding waters.



Admiral James H. Doyle, USN, during the Korean War.
(photo credit: US Navy)

The two officers and their team had less than two weeks to evacuate Almond’s X Corps. Working from a shed on Hungnam’s Pier #2, Forney and his men never left the port during the entire operation. Doyle, monitoring the withdrawal from his command ship, *USS Mount McKinley*,

³ James H. Doyle, *Proceedings*, Naval Institute Press, “December 1950 at Hungnam,” p. 50

⁴ Edward H. Forney, *Evacuation from Hungnam Memorandum*, June 25, 1953

also stayed in Hungnam harbor throughout the evolution. Neither man would leave the port until the evacuation's final day.

The job of orchestrating the movement of units and ships, formulating loading plans, fine-tuning operational timetables, and solving the inevitable problems that would arise during the massive amphibious withdrawal was a herculean feat. The biggest challenge, however, was one they hadn't anticipated. Almost overnight 100,000 North Korean refugees had filled the port, all hoping to board an American ship.

As it was now apparent to the evacuation's planners, the growing number of refugees presented a serious dilemma: there were simply too many people and too few vessels. Making matters worse, U.S. military guards had caught enemy soldiers disguised as refugees infiltrating the port. If civilians were allowed to board US ships, the chance of a saboteur joining them would increase dramatically. A North Korean spy detonating an explosive aboard a packed troop carrier would kill hundreds.

As the operation entered its second week and refugees continued to flood into Hungnam, MacArthur and his staff discussed their options. In a glimmer of hope for freezing refugees huddled at the water's edge, a small number of civilians were embarked in mid-December. If the Chinese didn't attack and more shipping became available, there were also plans to evacuate an additional 25,000 refugees.

Throughout December, as military personnel withdrew to Busan, the refugees watched and waited; many were beginning to lose hope. With Christmas Eve, or D-Day, the evacuation deadline, quickly approaching and the Chinese inching closer, the North Korean civilians were becoming increasingly desperate.



Dr. Hyun Bong-hak, with North Korean boy and his sister, October 1950.
(photo credit: Esther Hyun)

On December 21, after much prodding from X Corps civil affairs officer Hyun Bong-hak, a medical doctor from North Korea who spoke perfect English, and his close confidant and advocate, Col. Forney, the decision was made to evacuate as many civilians as possible *if available shipping could be found*. Thanks to Dr. Hyun's frequent meetings with Gen. Almond and his staff, the refugees were finally a priority. Forney and Doyle were now in a race against time.

A Christmas Eve Miracle

During the final four days of the evacuation, a flurry of activity occurred on the docks, piers, beaches, and ships of Hungnam. Doyle had masterfully acquired additional vessels, and Forney and his team were now filling them as fast as possible. As "three Victory ships and two LSTs⁵," were loaded with thousands of refugees during the waning hours of the operation, US Navy battleships, cruisers, and Corsairs pounded the Chinese in the surrounding mountains.



Refugees boarding an LST, December 1950.
(photo credit: US Marine Corps Archives)

On December 22, *SS Meredith Victory*, a Merchant Marine cargo ship skippered by Captain Leonard LaRue, sailed into Hungnam harbor. "As far as my glasses could sweep," LaRue wrote, "the dock area was dark with masses of humanity, all caught in a giant vise. Behind them were the Communist Chinese who would kill or enslave them; before them was the vast open sea."⁶

⁵ Forney, Edward, "After Action Report," p.16

⁶ Lester David, "I Witnessed a Christmas Miracle," *This Week Magazine*, December, 1960, p. 1



Refugees aboard SS *Meredith Victory*, December 1950.
(photo credit: Robert Lunney)

The next day, *Meredith Victory* left Hungnam with 14,000 refugees crammed into its cargo holds and on its decks. The *greatest rescue operation ever by a single vessel* had begun. Three days later the ship arrived at Geoje Island with all its passengers – including five babies that had been born during the voyage – alive. Often referred to as the “Ship of Miracles,” *Meredith Victory* became a symbol of all vessels that participated in the humanitarian rescue of 100,000 North Korean civilians from Hungnam. A decade later, LaRue told a reporter, “God’s own hand was at the helm of my ship.”⁷

When asked about *Meredith Victory’s* historic voyage, Bob Lunney, a 23-year-old crewman aboard the vessel in 1950, said, “War is also about preserving the integrity of a nation and the dignity of its people – we felt we had done that.”⁸

By 2p.m. on Christmas Eve, a total of 100,000 refugees had been rescued from the port. Writing about the unprecedented military and humanitarian evacuation, two prominent Naval historians said, “No corresponding operation in military history exists.”⁹

⁷ David, p.10

⁸ Author’s interview with Bob Lunney, November 2015

⁹ Malcolm Cagle and Frank Manson, *The Sea War in Korea*, Naval Institute Press, 1957 p.190

On December 24, the last day of the Chosin-Hungnam saga, the lead story in *The New York Times* read: “*Evacuation of Hungnam Completed . . . UN Fleet Brings Out 105,000 Soldiers and 100,000 Refugees.*”

US President Harry Truman was ecstatic. “I thank God for the success of the Hungnam operation. It is the best Christmas present I’ve ever had,” he proclaimed after receiving a 1 a.m. Christmas call from Omar Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff¹⁰.

The United Nations’ first humanitarian rescue operation was over, and Truman, America, and much of the world breathed a sigh of relief. A likely UN withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula – and a possible larger conflict with China and the Soviet Union – had been avoided.

History would show that Doyle and Forney were a near-perfect team. Doyle’s “wise leadership, tireless efforts and profound knowledge of amphibious warfare¹¹” proved to be invaluable to the success of Hungnam. He was the right man, at the right place, at the right time. Doyle, however, would point out in interviews and articles years later that the operation would not have been possible without Forney’s contribution: “Any credit flowing to me for the Hungnam redeployment must be shared with the man who controlled the port, Colonel Forney. No words of praise are too high to describe his performance.”¹²

But both men would be the first to admit that Hungnam, like Inchon and every other military operation they participated in, was a team effort. Without General MacArthur and Almond’s approval, Dr. Hyun Bong-hak’s passionate pleas and perseverance, and the dedication, courage, and fortitude of every serviceman who participated in the evacuation, the rescue of 100,000 North Korean civilians would never have happened.

Postscript – It is estimated that nearly a million descendants of those rescued at Hungnam live in freedom today in South Korea, the United States, and other countries around the world. ROK President Moon Jae-in is one of them.

Ned Forney is a US Marine Corps veteran and former educator who lives in Seoul and is writing a non-fiction book about the Hungnam Evacuation. With the

¹⁰ *New York Times* article, December 25, 1950

¹¹ Doyle, James, Biographical Sketch, Naval History and Heritage Command, December 1953

¹² Doyle, James, *Proceedings*, “December 1950 at Hungnam,” p. 49

support of the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (MPVA) and the Heungnam Evacuation Memorial Committee, Ned has interviewed 30 former North Korean refugees rescued during the December 1950 amphibious withdrawal. Ned is also the grandson of the late Colonel Edward H. Forney, the evacuation control officer during the Hungnam operation. Ned's writing appears in the Korea Times, Korea Herald, and newspapers and magazines in the United States. He writes a weekly blog (nedforney.com) and frequently gives lectures to university and civic groups in Seoul. He can be reached at ned@nedforney.com

