

Unsung hero of Hungnam Evacuation

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By Choe Chong-dae

My enthusiastic interest in the Hungnam Evacuation has led me to write some columns in this paper: “Remembering Hungnam Evacuation” on Jan 26, 2012, and “Hope in Hungnam” on July 9, 2012.

“Ode to My Father,” a Korean film produced in 2014, depicts Korea's turbulent modern history from the 1950s to the present day. Through the life of an ordinary man who flees from North Korea in December 1950, millions of viewers are now familiar with key events in 20th century Korean history.

The film's opening scene portrays the miraculous Hungnam Evacuation, in which U.S. military and Merchant Marine cargo ships delivered approximately 105,000 U.S. and Korean soldiers and 100,000 civilians to safety from the approaching Chinese Communist Army.

In December 1950, massive numbers of refugees poured into Hungnam Harbor. Suffering in sub-zero temperatures, they were desperately trying to flee North Korea in hopes of being evacuated to freedom in the South.

The U.N. humanitarian operation, led by U.S. organizers, was the largest amphibious evacuation of civilians in the Korean War. Dr. Hyun Bong-hak and Col. Edward H. Forney, USMC, later promoted to Brigadier General, played a crucial role in helping save 100,000 refugees.

Hyun (1922-2007), then a 28-year-old, U.S.-educated Korean medical doctor, served as translator and civil affairs adviser to Major General Edward M. Almond, commander of X Corps, U.S. Army.

Forney (1909-1965), the foremost amphibious expert in the U.S. Marine Corps, served as the deputy chief of staff for X Corps, and was the evacuation control officer during the Hungnam Evacuation.

Acutely aware of the importance of saving the refugees, Hyun repeatedly asked Forney to help persuade General Almond to evacuate North Korean refugees from Hungnam. Having wisely considered the situation, Forney agreed, telling Hyun, “the word impossible is not in my dictionary,” a famous quote by Napoleon.

Accordingly, Hyun received encouragement from Forney who masterfully plotted out how the evacuation would be implemented. Together, Hyun and Forney met with Almond numerous times to report the refugees' urgent situation. Finally, Almond approved the plan to evacuate as many refugees as possible.

One of the many ships involved in the withdrawal, the SS Meredith Victory, evacuated more than 14,000



refugees. Its voyage started on Dec. 22 and miraculously ended three days later on Christmas Day at Geoje Island, off the southern coast of Korea.

Forney's extraordinary dedication to the Hungnam Evacuation, along with his amphibious and logistical expertise, helped save 100,000 refugees. After the Korean War, Forney served at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and returned to Korea in June 1957. With his enthusiastic love for Korea, he served as the senior U.S Marine Corps adviser to the Korea Marine Corps from 1957 to 1959. He helped establish the ROK 1st Marine Division base in Pohang, and in 2010 the Korean Marine Corps honored Forney by naming the main avenue of Pohang, "Forney Road." A monument commemorating his service to the ROK Marine Corps now stands at the entrance of the road.

While in Pohang, Forney might have visited Gyeongju to see the ancient Shilla cultural relics and might have met my father, Choe Nam-ju, a pioneer of Korea archeology. I am a good friend with Ned Forney, Col. Forney's grandson, who lives in Seoul and is currently writing a book on Hyun Bong-hak, his grandfather and the Hungnam Evacuation.

Brigadier General Forney retired from the Marine Corps in 1959 after 28 years of service. The philanthropic mission of General Forney had a profound impact on my mind and reminds me of the quote by former U.S Defense Secretary James N. Mattis, "There is no better friend, and no worse enemy, than a U.S. Marine."

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