



KOREAN WAR MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

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NEWSLETTER

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Expanded January–April, 2020 Issue

KWMF Co-Founder John Stevens Celebrates 99th Birthday



HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JOHN!

Photo courtesy of Wayne Freedman, ABC7 TV News

On April 22, John R. Stevens, Lieutenant Colonel, USMC (Ret.), celebrated his 99th birthday. John is a World War II and Korean War veteran, and Korean War Memorial Foundation Co-Founder and 2nd Vice President. The Covid-19 pandemic precluded any possibility of a large and well-deserved festive gathering. So John celebrated the occasion in his typical fashion: working alone in his office, just as he has been doing nearly every day since he helped launch the Foundation more than a decade ago.



John at work in his office.

Photo courtesy of Wayne Freedman, ABC7 TV News

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“John is without question a man of few words – but they’re usually words that are just right in context. A few years ago, a San Francisco TV news reporter was interviewing him for a Memorial Day story. While discussing the Chosin Reservoir battle, where John and the understrength 1st Marine Division were surrounded by over 100,000 Chinese troops, the reporter asked, ‘So what’s it like to be surrounded?’ Without missing a beat, John quietly replied, ‘Lots of targets.’ Not a politically correct answer, but a candid one that any combat veteran can relate to.”

—Gerard Parker, Executive Director, Korean War Memorial Foundation

A Marine for All Time

By Ned Forney

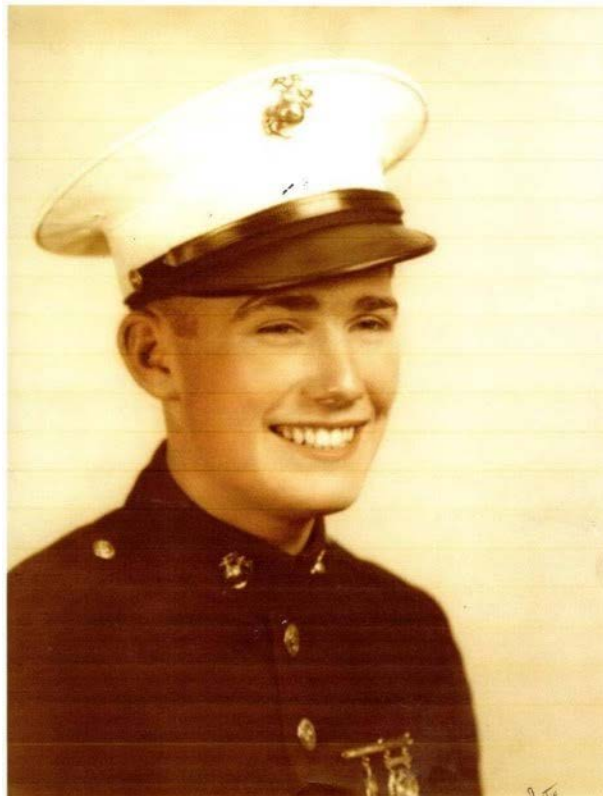
NOTE: Written in 2018

John Stevens is 97. Despite his age, however, the steely-eyed Marine who fought in World War II and Korea is still on a mission. He refuses to slow down. He’s determined to keep the legacy of the brave men he served and sacrificed with alive for future generations.

And he’s also determined to be the lucky Marine who gets to drink the “last man” bottle of cognac at the [Marines' Memorial Club](#) in San Francisco. “I really want that bottle,” he tells friends with a fiery look. And if his past ninety-plus years of beating the odds is any indication, he’ll get it.

During his 23 years as a Marine, Stevens went from private to lieutenant colonel and earned two Bronze Stars for heroism in combat. He served at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941; Okinawa during the last major battle of World War II; and the Inchon Landing, liberation of Seoul, and Battle of Chosin in 1950.

His incredible life of service to country and Corps is testimony to the millions of men and women of the “Greatest Generation” who dedicated their lives to saving America and the free world from fascism and communism.



John Stevens' bootcamp graduation photo, 1939 (Photo credit: John Stevens)

A Poker Game and a Marine Recruiter

John Stevens was born on April 22, 1921, in Butte, Montana. He dropped out of high school at the age of 16 and joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), where he worked as a baker, lumberjack and fire fighter. After being discharged from the CCC in 1939, he returned to his hometown and, like many young men, found it hard to find a job. When he heard the Navy was hiring, he jumped on the opportunity and went to Salt Lake City to take his enlistment physical.

On the train to Utah, Stevens “sat up all night playing poker” and the next morning failed the eye exam. Discouraged, and regretting the money and opportunity he’d lost in the card game, he headed for home. But fate – and a Marine Corps recruiter – intervened.

“As I was leaving the office, a man in a blue uniform with a red stripe on the trouser leg caught me by the arm,” Stevens said. “Here are some chits for a meal and hotel room,” the Marine told him. “Get a good night’s sleep and then come back tomorrow.”

“I didn’t know what the Marine Corps was. I had absolutely no idea, but I didn’t want to go back to Butte,” Stevens recalled. The rest is history. He enlisted in the Marines and never looked back.



A day that will live in infamy, December 7, 1941 (Photo credit: NY Times)

A Day That Will Live in Infamy

After graduating from bootcamp in San Diego, the 18-year-old Marine joined the 1st Marine Defense Battalion and was eventually sent to Midway Island and Pearl Harbor.

On the fateful morning of December 7, 1941, Stevens, recently promoted to sergeant, was awakened at 7 a.m. by loud explosions. Dashing outside, he witnessed firsthand the effects of bullets and shrapnel on the human body. “Japanese airplanes were dropping bombs and torpedoes on ships,” he remembers, “and then coming back and strafing the general area.”

“The attack was over in only two hours,” Stevens recounted in a speech he gave in 2009. “They were pulling bodies out of the harbor and bringing them over to the naval hospital and stacking them up like cordwood. It was a pretty terrible sight.” The devastating Japanese attack would forever change the 20-year-old Marine, his country, and the world.

The Battle of Okinawa

By 1942, Stevens had risen to the rank of master tech sergeant and been offered a field commission. He accepted the promotion, became a second lieutenant, and two years later was promoted to captain. He then joined the 1st Marine Division Signal Company, where he served as

executive officer and worked with Navajo “code talkers,” Native American Marines who transmitted coded messages in the Navajo language and played a key role in helping defeat the Japanese.

A year later, Stevens was off the coast of Okinawa waiting for the largest amphibious operation of the Pacific War to begin. “As we approached Okinawa, we started receiving Japanese air attacks [kamikazes],” Stevens remembers. “It is very frightening to be aboard a ship when you’re under constant air attack,” he added. “There’s no place to hide. You can’t dig a hole and jump in.”

On April 1, 1945, the 24-year-old landed on Okinawa and spent the next three months fighting the Japanese. The [Battle of Okinawa](#), Japan’s last attempt to destroy the US before an all-out assault on the mainland, was a hellish experience for every man, woman, and child on the godforsaken island. When US forces finally secured the Japanese stronghold in late June 1945, over 12,000 Americans, an estimated 100,000 Japanese, and approximately 145,000 civilians were dead. Less than two months later, the bloodiest conflict in history was over.



Captain Stevens (standing on far right) and his men at the Battle of Okinawa (Photo credit: John Stevens)

The Korean War

In 1950, Stevens, now the commanding officer of Able Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, was sent to Korea. "On 25 June, 1950, the day that the North Koreans launched their attack, I was on leave in Hollywood, California, when I received a telegram ordering me back to base," he recalls.

Once again, America was mobilizing for war. "We had just 7 days," he remembers, "to take in replacements, issue combat equipment, make out wills, take out allotments, and decide where our families would be living, among other details."

On August 2, Able Company arrived in Korea. The unit was immediately sent to the Pusan Perimeter. At the Battle of Obong-ni, or "No-name Ridge," as the Marines called it, Captain Stevens was awarded a Bronze Star for valor. During a "sudden and ferocious enemy attack," the Marine officer rallied his men, repulsed the enemy, and reorganized his company for a counterattack. "His outstanding display of personal courage, devotion to duty and leadership was an inspiration to his command" (from award citation).

At midnight on September 6, Able Company was pulled from the front lines and told to begin preparing for an upcoming "secret" amphibious operation. The next day a new officer reported to the company: Lieutenant Baldomero Lopez. The 25-year-old Marine from Tampa, Florida, had volunteered to join the unit.

Landing at Red Beach

On September 15, 1950, D-Day for the Inchon Landing, Stevens and his men climbed over the railings of their troop ship, the USS *Henrico*, and boarded landing craft for their 5:30 p.m. assault on Red Beach. As they raced towards the shore and "the first wave came within 30 yards of the seawall," Captain Stevens radioed for US Navy Skyraider attack planes to make strafing passes along the beach.

Moments later, their landing craft slammed against Inchon's rocky shore.

When Lt. Lopez, the 3rd platoon commander, and his men landed on the beach, there was no room to maneuver. The Marines immediately began taking casualties. For a brief moment the attack faltered.

Sacrificing So That Others Might Live

Realizing the situation was becoming desperate, Lt. Lopez stormed over the seawall into a hail of enemy fire, crawled forward, and pulled the arming pin from a hand grenade. Stevens later explained, "He [Lopez] got ready to throw the grenade into the bunker, and as he lifted his arm. . . he was hit in the right shoulder and chest by automatic weapon fire."

The young Marine lieutenant swept his wounded right arm toward the grenade, pulled it under him, and "took the full impact of the explosion." He died instantly. Lt. Lopez was posthumously awarded the [Medal of Honor](#), becoming the first Marine of the Korean War to receive the nation's highest award for valor. "He had served just 8 days in Korea and less than 1/2 hour in combat," Stevens said.

Minutes later, Able Company Marines took their objective, paving the way for subsequent waves of men to land at Inchon and repulse the enemy. In the 30-minute fight to secure just one corner of Red Beach, eight Marines from Stevens' company had died.



Lt. Baldomero Lopez leading his men over the seawall at Inchon (Photo credit: USMC)



Captain Stevens (center pointing to map), with his platoon leaders and Korean interpreter, on the outskirts of Seoul. (Photo credit: US Marine Archives)

Stevens and his men went on to fight in the streets of Seoul, land at Wonsan, make their way to the snow-covered mountains of North Korea, and take part in one of the most epic battles in Marine Corps history: Chosin. During his time in Korea, Stevens honorably served his men, his country, and his beloved Corps.

"Dogged Determination and Indomitable Spirit"

Twelve years after returning from the Korean War, LtCol Stevens retired from the Marines, settled in San Francisco, and began a successful business career that spanned four decades.

His memories of WWII, Korea, and the brave men he served with, however, stayed with him. In 2009, the [Korean War Memorial Foundation](#) (KWMF) was started in San Francisco, and Stevens immediately joined the effort to raise funds to construct a monument to the men who served, sacrificed, and died during the Korean War.

When asked about Stevens' contribution to the project, [Gerry Parker](#), Executive Director of KWMF, said, "John worked six, often seven, days a week, devoting himself heart and soul to the demanding mission of bringing the Korean War Memorial from dream to reality." On August 1, 2016, the memorial was officially opened in San Francisco's Presidio. "It now stands as a testament for all time to his dogged determination and indomitable spirit," Mr. Parker proudly told me.



Mr. Stevens, please let us know where and when your 100th birthday celebration will take place. We're looking forward to the party. And here's to drinking that bottle of cognac. Cheers!

The author would like to thank Lt-Col John Stevens, Gerry Parker, and Greg DeRego for their friendship and support in researching and writing this article.

Author's Update: John celebrated his 99th birthday on April 22, 2020. One more year to go before the big party!

Ned Forney is a Marine veteran, career educator, and writer living in Seoul, South Korea. He is currently working on a book about the Battle of Chosin and Hungnam Evacuation. He can be reached at nedforney.com



John Stevens pointing to his platoon commander in the iconic Inchon Landing image, which is featured prominently at the Korean War Memorial in San Francisco. (Photo credit: Wayne Freedman, ABC 7 TV News)



LtCol Stevens before retiring from the Marines. (Photo credit: John Stevens)



John at Pearl Harbor for the 73rd Anniversary commemoration, December 7, 2014

(Photo credit: John Stevens)

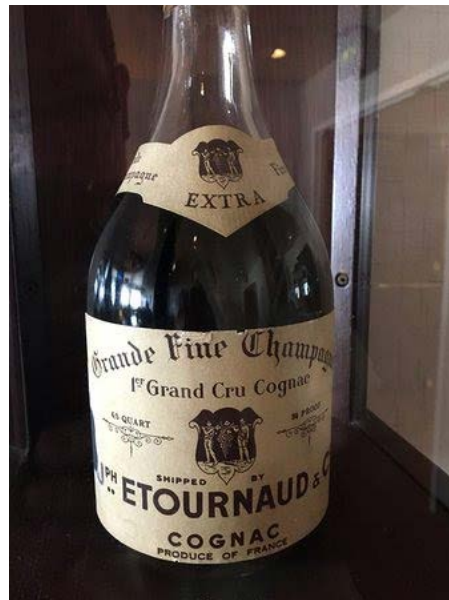


John with his wife Jody. John has four children, seven grandchildren, and twelve great-grandchildren.

(Photo credit: John Stevens)

This bottle of cognac will be opened by the last surviving member of the "Chosin Few," Golden Gate Chapter, veterans of the Chosin Reservoir campaign. It is under lock and key in a glass case in Chesty's Bar on the top floor of the Marines' Memorial Club in San Francisco.

(Photo credit: Trip Advisor)



The wall at the Korean War Memorial in the Presidio in San Francisco

(Photo credit: Charity Vargas, Presidio Trust)



John Stevens, Marine. Semper Fidelis.

Photo credit: Wayne Freedman, ABC7 TV News

Seoul Mayor Park Won Soon Visits the Korean War Memorial



On January 9, Mayor Park Won Soon of Seoul paid a visit to the Korean War Memorial in the Presidio of San Francisco. He was accompanied by representatives of his Metropolitan Government. Waiting to welcome the visitors were KWMF President and Chairman Judge Quentin L. Kopp and KWMF's other officers and Board members. This was the Mayor's second visit to the Memorial, and the KWMF representatives were pleased to renew their friendship with this special guest.

The Honorable Park Won Soon, Mayor of Seoul, Republic of Korea



Judge Kopp greeted the Mayor at the Memorial entrance. After initial introductory remarks, the two, followed by the group, proceeded to the Memorial wall, where the Mayor lay a commemorative wreath and observed a moment of silence for all who served and sacrificed in defense of South Korea's freedom.



Following the wreath ceremony, the American hosts and their Korean guests moved to the commemorative tiles and plaques on the Memorial perimeter along Lincoln Boulevard.



A solemn moment: Judge Kopp and the Mayor read the commemorative inscriptions, many with the initials "KIA".

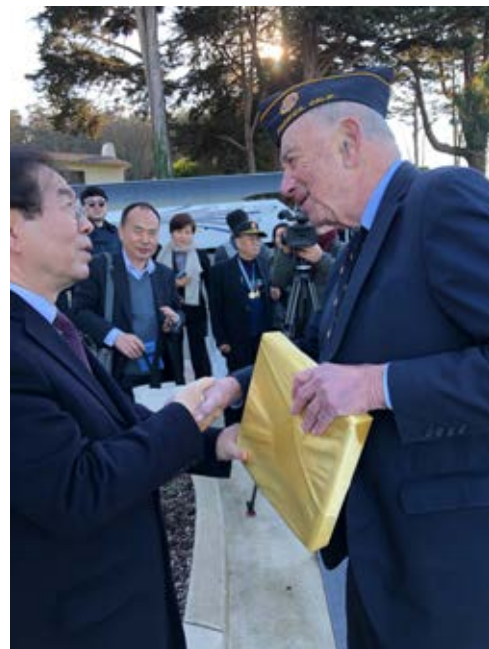


KWMF Board member Pete Gleichenhau spoke with the Mayor.



The Mayor stopped for a brief rest and chat with KWMF Co-Founder and Treasurer Don Reid, a Korean War veteran, on the bench that Don and his late wife Helen, a Korean-American, donated to the Memorial.

As the group made its way back to the Memorial entrance and the visit was about to draw to a close, Mayor Park and Judge Kopp exchanged gifts as members of the Mayor's delegation looked on. The Mayor seemed pleased to receive a local favorite: a bottle of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon.



KWMF's officers thanked the Mayor and his delegation, and wished them a safe journey home.

Later, following Mayor Park's return to Korea, Judge Kopp and the Mayor exchanged letters of appreciation. The Mayor's letter included a special invitation to KWMF's officers.



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January 15, 2020

The Honorable Park Won Soon
Mayor
Seoul Metropolitan Government
110 Sejong-daero Jung-gu
Seoul 04524
Korea

Dear Mayor Park,

On behalf of all of us in the Korean War Memorial Foundation (KWMF), and of all Korean War veterans and their families, please accept our sincere gratitude for your second visit to the Korean War Memorial in the Presidio of San Francisco on January 9, 2020.

Your presence and your thoughtful presentation of a commemorative wreath are deeply appreciated. This enhanced the relevance of the Memorial as an enduring symbol of the hard-fought war that kept your country and the world safe from the spread of Communism nearly seventy years ago.

We wish you well as you continue your dedicated public service. And we hope to have the honor of welcoming you again on a third visit to the Korean War Memorial here in San Francisco in the future.

Yours truly,

Judge Quentin L. Kopp (Ret.)
President and Chairman of the Board
Korean War Memorial Foundation

Cc: Mr. Hagen Choi, President, San Francisco-Seoul Sister City Committee
KWMF Officers and Board of Directors



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

February 13, 2020

Quentin L. Kopp
KWMF President and Chairman of the Board

Dear Mr. Kopp,

First of all, it is my pleasure to inform you that the delegation of the Seoul Metropolitan Government has safely returned after a successful visit to the United States from January 7 to 16, 2020. I express my deepest gratitude to you for your time and warm hospitality despite your busy schedule.

During the visit, we were able to meet with the great present and future leaders in various fields like politics, economy and science technology, and the insightful conversations with them gave a huge inspiration to Seoul for our future vision design.

The visit to the Korean War Memorial in San Francisco allowed me to appreciate the dedication of the Korean War veterans who sacrificed their lives for the freedom and democracy of Korea, laying the groundwork for the country's rapid economic development and innovation of Seoul for the future.

As I mentioned earlier, the Seoul Metropolitan Government plans to host *Seoul Peace Forum* this October. I would like to cordially invite you and the veterans to the Forum and show you how successfully Seoul has been reborn as a modern city from the ashes of the war. Upon this opportunity, I will be able to extend my deepest appreciation for your sacrifice and dedication once again on behalf of the citizens of Seoul.

I wish the New Year brings you an abundance of wealth, health and hope and look forward to seeing you soon in Seoul near future.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Won Soon Park'.

Won Soon Park
Mayor of Seoul

Seoul City Hall, 110 Sejong-daero, Jung-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea <http://english.seoul.go.kr>

Profile of a Korean War Veteran: J. Birney Dibble, M.D.

All photos courtesy of J. Birney Dibble, M.D.

J. Birney Dibble, M.D. was born in Madras, India in 1925. His father and mother were Methodist missionaries, a pastor and a nurse respectively. When he was four, the family moved back to Illinois. He later graduated from East Aurora, Illinois High School, where he served as Class President in his junior year, and President of the Student Council in his senior year. He excelled at sports: a three-letter man all four years, and co-captain of both track and football his senior year.

After graduation, Birney enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He served from 1943 to 1945 as part of the V-12 College Training Program at Duke University until May, 1945, when he was ordered to the U.S. Naval Hospital at the Camp Lejeune, NC Marine Base. He served as ward corpsman there until the war ended. As he recently commented, wryly, "I joined the Navy to help rid the world of dictators, but it didn't work." After his discharge, he attended medical school at the University of Illinois Chicago Campus from 1945 to 1949. Upon graduation in 1949, he married Edna Frances Baird. They had two children, Eric and Barbara, and remained married for 52 years, until Edna's death in 2001.

Birney interned at Chicago's Cook County Hospital from 1949 through



J. Birney Dibble, M.D., fishing in Wisconsin in recent years

1951. He was recalled to active duty that year, and spent the next sixteen months as a combat surgeon with the 1st Marine Division in Korea. His first duty assignment was as Battalion Surgeon with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines.

In February, 1952, Birney was sent up to the front lines to evaluate a wounded Marine for possible helicopter evacuation. His Jeep ambulance driver, Sergeant John ("Gump") Gumpert, had been wounded for the third time just a few months earlier, when he and his fellow Marines won the battle for "The Punchbowl."

Gump and Birney drove as far as they could up the reverse slope of Hill 812 and then continued on foot.

They were scrambling the rest of the way upslope to the frontline bunkers when they suddenly came under Chinese mortar fire. As they dove into a deep crater for cover, they were both wounded, neither seriously,

by fragments from a nearby blast. As Birney was dressing Gump's minor head wound, the sergeant said, "This is my fourth wound, Doctor -- but please don't put me up for another Heart!" When Birney asked why not, Gump replied, "They'd transfer me to some rear-echelon billet." Birney held up his right arm, bleeding from a half dozen small pieces of shrapnel and said, "Well, then I won't report my wound either." The doctor later elaborated, explaining that if he had written himself up for the award, he would be compelled to write Gump up as well. And Gump would have been forced to reluctantly leave his brothers in arms at the front for a safe post in the rear. That's the story of why Dr. Dibble did NOT receive a Purple Heart. At least not until decades later, when his children, aware of this story, urged him to apply for the medal. Birney did so, and finally received his Purple Heart. Better late than never.



Birney on the rim of "The Punchbowl," January, 1952



Sergeant John Gumpert, USMC

In late July, 1952, Birney was promoted from Lieutenant (J.G.) to full Lieutenant, and became Commanding Officer of E Company, 1st Medical Battalion, 1st Marine Division, commonly referred to as “Easy Med.”

This was the period when the Marines were fighting a series of hotly contested hill battles not far from Panmunjom and the 38th Parallel. During the bloody Battle of Bunker Hill, just north of the Jamestown Line, Dr. Dibble described the grim results of the ferocious fighting during just one weekend of the August, 1952 battle:

“1,004 wounded men were triaged from Friday night to Monday afternoon, 142 major operations under general anesthesia—belly, chest, and amputations—better than one an hour. We evacuated 153 walking wounded to Able Med for minor debridement, shipped 288 severely wounded men to the hospital ship Consolation in Inchon Harbor—48 Sikorsky helicopters with six stretchers in each. We lost 21 men during or after surgery. Three men came in DOA. That means we operated on 397 WIAs in the Minor Tent. A high percentage of these minors were multiple shrapnel wounds—5, 10, 20, even 30 wounds in a single body, but none of them breaking bone or penetrating the belly or thorax. All of the surgeries in the Minor Tent were performed with only local anesthetic. Many would have been called ‘majors’ in a stateside hospital.”

For consolation throughout his war-time service, Birney always carried with him a treasured photo of him and his wife Edna Baird, taken on a sunny day in Chicago before he left for Korea.



Dr. Dibble, CO of Easy Med, August, 1952



Easy Med



Coming Home: Birney's ship approaching the Golden Gate Bridge



Birney and his first wife Edna

Birney returned from Korea in 1953. He received sixteen medals in all, including the Bronze Star and Letter of Commendation, both with Combat "V," as well as the very late-arriving Purple Heart mentioned above. Upon his return to civilian life, he served as a surgical resident at Cook County Hospital from 1953 to 1957. He was certified as a Diplomate of the American Board of Surgery in 1959. He practiced surgery in Eau Claire, Wisconsin from 1957 to 1980, with time out for three years at a Lutheran mission hospital in Tanzania. He was also Chief of Surgery for three years at Luther Hospital and seven years at Sacred Heart Hospital.

From 1980 to 1998, Birney lived and did surgery overseas. He worked in Guam and Saudi Arabia, as well as at mission hospitals in a half dozen nations in Africa and Latin America. He finally decided to "frame the last scalpel," as he described his retirement, in 1998. Since then, he has devoted himself to reading, writing, hunting, fishing, racketball, gardening, and making firewood. He has published three novels, four books of non-fiction, and several hundred pieces in regional and national magazines. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, the National Platform Association, the United Methodist Church, and the Emmaus Community, as well as a former member of the National Writers' Club. Birney and his second wife, Margaret, have been married for seventeen years. Birney has two children, three grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

J. Birney Dibble, M.D.: Korean War veteran, surgeon, husband, father, friend, and so much more. A life well-lived -- and still being well-lived.



Birney and his second wife Margaret



Birney (far right) and friends at a recent get-together

Thank you, Lighthouse Worldwide Solutions

KWMF wishes to thank Dr. Kim Tae Yun and her staff at Lighthouse Worldwide Solutions in Fremont, CA — www.golighthouse.com — for their generosity in underwriting the costs of printing and mailing this newsletter.



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