

# Best Christmas present ever

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By Ned Forney

Seventy years ago navy demolition experts, army engineers and hundreds of other American servicemen, all part of a U.N. force that weeks earlier had numbered over 100,000, watched as a massive explosion — the largest since World War II — erupted over a small port in North Korea.

With docks, warehouses and wharfs bursting into flames, concussions rocking the harbor, and grey mushroom clouds lingering over the waterfront, the largest amphibious withdrawal of the Korean War and the greatest seaborne evacuation of civilians, under combat conditions, in U.S. history had come to a dramatic end.

In what is today called the “Hungnam Evacuation,” named after the port city in which the operation took place from Dec. 9-24, 1950, the Christmas Eve explosion — caused by tons of explosives rigged throughout the harbor by the retreating Americans — obliterated the port. Minutes later, Chinese soldiers stormed into Hungnam.



By the next day, the operation was front-page news across America. The lead story in The New York Times read: “Evacuation of Hungnam Completed . . . UN Fleet Brings Out 105,000 Soldiers and 100,000 Refugees.”

President Harry Truman, realizing a catastrophe had been avoided and U.S. forces would live to fight another day, was elated. “I thank God for the success of the Hungnam operation,” he told Omar Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during a 1 a.m. Christmas call. “It is the best Christmas present I've ever had.”

Sometimes referred to as the “Korean War's Dunkirk,” the evacuation had taken place as a result of the most epic engagement of the Korean conflict: The Battle of Changjin (Chosin) Reservoir, a titanic struggle in which the 1st Marine Division, 31st Regimental Combat Team, 41 Royal Marine Commando, and countless ROK soldiers, surrounded by more than 120,000 Chinese, fought their way 70 miles through snow-covered mountains to Hungnam.

But there was more to the story. Following behind the Americans were tens of thousands of North Korean civilians who hoped to escape through the besieged port.

In what many generals and politicians back home deemed an insurmountable task, three men — Marine Col. Edward H. Forney, the evacuation control officer for the operation; Navy Adm. James H. Doyle, the commander responsible for the evacuation's Naval component; and Hyun Bong-hak, a Korean doctor assigned to the U.S. Army as a translator and civil affairs officer — came together to pull off the impossible.

By the last day of the withdrawal, not only had the military personnel at Hungnam — and their equipment, supplies, and vehicles — been loaded onto waiting ships, but 100,000 North Korean men, women, and children had also been saved.

Packed into U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine vessels, the refugees had sailed to freedom on more than 90 American ships, the most famous being the SS Meredith Victory, a Merchant Marine cargo vessel that transported 14,000 civilians to Geoje Island in a single voyage.

As we relax with family and friends this holiday season, it is fitting that we also pay tribute to those who listened to their “better angels” and despite overwhelming odds made it a priority to do the right thing, for the right reasons, in a most difficult situation.

Today, there are an estimated one million descendants of those rescued at Heungnam living in freedom in South Korea, the United States, and throughout the world. And freedom, as the former refugees, their families, and so many others would agree, is a priceless Christmas gift, one we should never take for granted.

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