

Opinion

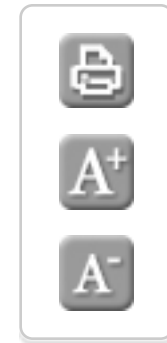
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Guest Column

'We will never forget'

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By Ned Forney

As the world watches the heartbreaking, disturbing scenes of fear, desperation and chaos unfold in Kabul, Afghanistan, I'm reminded of an all-but-forgotten U.S. military withdrawal that took place more than 70 years ago: the Hungnam Evacuation.



The similarities between the two situations are powerful. The Hungnam Evacuation, named for the North Korean port city where U.N. forces retreated after the Battle of Chosin Reservoir, occurred in a mountainous, enemy-controlled, war-torn country. It was a last-ditch effort to rescue Americans and their allies as well as thousands of locals who had assisted them.

Much like what's happening in Afghanistan today, the 1950 Korean War evacuation took place under extreme conditions. Hungnam was cut off by enemy forces, and tens of thousands of civilians were trapped and wanted desperately to escape. And there was only one way out – U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine ships.



Evacuees crowd the interior of a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III transport aircraft, carrying some 640 Afghans to Qatar from Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 15, in this photo released by the U.S. Air Force. /Reuters-Yonhap



Refugees crowd aboard fishing boats to escape from Hungnam, North Korea, in December 1950. They then transferred to U.S. warships and landing ship tanks (LSTs) for evacuation. A total of approximately 100,000 North Korean civilians fled to the South aboard military vessels and merchant ships during the Korean War evacuation. / Korea Times file

On Christmas Eve of 1950, after two weeks of intense, round-the-clock operations that included repelling Chinese attacks and loading more than 100 ships of all sizes, the withdrawal ended.

The largest seaborne military evacuation of civilians, under combat conditions, in American history was over. Remarkably, more than 105,000 military personnel – along with all their equipment – and over 100,000 North Korean civilians were saved.

Although few people today remember the epic undertaking, the Hungnam Evacuation was headline news in December 1950. The U.S. military – outnumbered and thousands of miles away from home – had completed its mission. Despite overwhelming odds, America had achieved what many thought would be impossible.

Now, more than seven decades later, the U.S. is once again in a similar situation.

Scenes of Afghan men begging American soldiers and Marines to let them board planes, women clutching babies and children crying as they squeeze their parents' hands while they make their way toward an unknown future, all remind me of what I've heard during my interviews with Hungnam refugees.

Now in their late 80s and 90s, they tell me how frightened they were of dying, how terrified they were of being left behind to face retribution by North Korea's Communist forces, and how their only hope of surviving was to get aboard an American ship.

Then they usually say "Thank you." They're grateful for what the American GIs did to save them. "We will never forget," they say with tear-filled eyes. For them, it's as if the evacuation occurred yesterday.

I can't imagine the panic Afghan families must feel as they are trying to reach the airport. Or the terror they experience when they realize that if they don't board a U.S. plane, they'll be left to the mercy of the Taliban.

But then I think of the estimated 1 million descendants of those rescued at Hungnam, and I remember their words, "We will never forget."

I only hope that the Afghans pleading for the U.S. government to save them – and the thousands of U.S. citizens still trapped in Kabul – will be able to say the same thing in the years to come.

Ned Forney (ned.forney1985@gmail.com), a Marine Corps veteran, is a writer living in Seoul. His grandfather, Col. Edward H. Forney, USMC, was an evacuation control officer at Hungnam.

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Top 5 Entertainment News

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- 2 Lee Ha-nee on her double role in upcoming comedy series 'One the Woman'
- 3 Expanded platforms call big-name film directors to small screen
- 4 Musical 'Jekyll & Hyde' to hit stage with new cast
- 5 Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts dies aged 80

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Tokyo Olympics from the sidelines

