

Korea and US: partners in war and peace

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By John Alderman Linton

Dr. Hyun Bong-hak, a graduate of Severance Medical College (today, the Yonsei University College of Medicine), is remembered as a “Korean Schindler” for his historic role in aiding the evacuation of over 100,000 refugees from Hungnam during the Korean War.

The US X Corps' original plan was to remove American and Korean soldiers from Hungnam to Busan, in the rear. But Hyun, who was serving as an interpreter, teamed up with Col. Edward H. Forney to convince the X Corps commander to evacuate civilians as well.

Seventy years later, a descendant of the colonel came to Severance Hospital with an intractable medical condition. She and her family received 10 million won (\$7,638) to cover the cost of treatment from Han Seung-gyeong, chair of the Hyun Bong-hak Memorial Association and the Yonsei University Medical College Alumni Association.

The relative explained that she had made a full recovery thanks to the treatment she received at Severance. “Now we're the ones being helped,” she said.

When Koreans celebrate their liberation from Japanese rule each year on Aug. 15, I am reminded of the small part my late uncle William Linton played in that struggle.

He often shared a story about the Battle of Peleliu, in the Palau archipelago, where he received a medal for bravery from the U.S. military.

Uncle Bill was the sharpest of his brothers. He could speak seven languages and had a knack for math and physics. Given his fluency in Japanese and knowledge of the kanji characters used in that language, he was assigned to intelligence while on the island of Peleliu.

As the history books tell us, the marine assault there encountered sharper Japanese resistance than expected, and the marines were short on manpower.

One day, when the fighting was at its fiercest, Uncle Bill heard the Korean language being spoken nearby. A Korean man begged him to save 48 young Korean conscripts who were starving in a cave.

Without a second thought, my uncle agreed to go. He was undeterred by the dangers of going behind enemy lines or the minefield that lay between him and the cave.

“Step exactly where I do, and you'll be safe,” the Korean man advised. Uncle Bill followed the man through the minefield and soon reached a deep cave.

Sure enough, there were 48 Koreans inside. Upon seeing my uncle, one of the young Koreans said, “We might as well starve to death here because the Americans will just shoot us anyway. They can't tell us apart from the Japanese.”

As the Koreans in the cave hesitated, another man recognized my uncle and gave him a hearty handshake. “I can vouch for him — his father is the principal of Shinheung School in Jeonju! He's trustworthy, so I say we go along with him.”

Soon the 48 Koreans in the cave were marching toward the American position in single file.

While I was amazed at my uncle's bravery, he insisted the only brave thing he had done was walking at the head of the line, waving to the American soldiers and shouting, "Don't shoot!"

The American commander reprimanded Uncle Bill for rounding up so many POWs in the middle of the finding when there was nobody to spare for guard duty.

But my uncle pointed out that no love was lost between the Japanese and Koreans, given all the hardships the Koreans had endured during more than three decades of Japanese colonial rule.

Uncle Bill had a clever idea for the commander. "If we have these Koreans stand guard over the Japanese prisoners, we can send the soldiers on guard duty into battle."

Koreans and Americans have a close relationship that goes beyond ideology and values. They are boon companions who need to lend each other a helping hand.

Over the past few decades, Americans have sadly gotten addicted to buying cheap goods from other countries, instead of making them at home. As a result, the U.S.' manufacturing sector has gone into decline.

COVID-19 triggered a global chip crunch that became a serious headache for the US, which had grown heavily dependent on Chinese imports. That is one reason the US is under so much pressure from China.

But over those same decades, Korea's manufacturing sector has gone from strength to strength. The time has come for Americans to learn a lesson from Korea's industrial expertise.

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