

Armor Pioneer Series - General William A. Knowlton

## All He Ever Wanted to Be Was a Soldier

by Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Kelley



General Knowlton, when he was CG of NATO forces in Turkey.

When one thinks of the pioneers of armor, names like Chaffee, Van Voorhis, and Patton frequently come to mind. However, another generation of officers, those who were the lieutenants of the fledgling armored forces during World War II, were, in a sense, the second generation pioneers of armor. They employed the early versions of iron horses in combat at the soldier level. Over the course of their careers, they forged the development of armor and armor tactics from rudimentary combat cars to the modern M1 tank.

This article will trace the career of one of these second generation pioneers of armor, William A. Knowlton.

For Knowlton, being a soldier was all he ever wanted to do.

The Weston, Massachusetts, native gained his first Army experience at the age of 14. In the summer of 1934, he participated in recruit training with B Troop of the 3rd Cavalry in Vermont.

Knowlton recollected, "I would hang around watching the troopers work out and eventually they invited me to train with them.



In 1942, Cadet Knowlton (on the turret with fur collar) spends his spring leave with several West Point classmates at Pine Camp, N.Y., where the 4th Armored Division was training.

They issued me a horse and they had me doing basic horsemanship and cavalry training with them. Some of the troopers were veterans of World War I, and they were very good to us."

The following summer, Knowlton joined the 51st Field Artillery in the 26th Infantry Division as an underage

private and participated in the Grand Maneuvers of Pine Camp, New York.

In 1938, after graduating with academic honors from St. Mark's School in Southborough, Massachusetts, Knowlton enlisted in the 298th Infantry in Hawaii and went to the Military Academy Prep School. At that time, the West Point Prep School was not one school but a series of schools in each Army area.

Knowlton recalled training with the 11th Tank Company on Oahu that year. "I gained a little experience with those old tanks where you wedged yourself up into the turret. You reached down to kick the driver in the head if you wanted to go faster. You put your foot in his back if you wanted to stop, kicked him in the right shoulder if you wanted to turn. When the turret turned, you had to adjust your whole position and move around and try to wedge your feet into some of the ammunition boxes to hold yourself up."

Knowlton entered West Point in 1939 with the intent of going into artillery. But armor had just arrived on the battlefield in a big way. The ex-

plots of Rommel and German Armor led to a tremendous interest in armor on the part of West Point cadets.

In 1942, Cadet Knowlton volunteered to spend his Spring leave with several of his West Point classmates with the 4th Armored Division at Pine Camp, New York. While there, Knowlton was impressed with two young majors, one named Creighton Abrams and another named Delk Oden, who commanded battalions at the time.

"They gave us a jeep and had a lieutenant assigned to work with us. I remember getting into long discussions with Abrams and Oden about the Army and Armor." Knowlton recalled. "The units had medium tanks. I believe they were early versions of the M-4."

Through this training and the favorable impression of leaders like Abrams and Oden, Knowlton was convinced he wanted to join the mounted forces. He particularly wanted to go into light armor and reconnaissance. That summer (1942), he and two classmates spent several weeks as platoon leaders in the 77th Recon Troop at Fort Jackson, S.C., further influencing him toward reconnaissance.

The class of 1943 was accelerated to graduate in January instead of the traditional June week. Knowlton was graduated seventh in overall class ranking, fourth among the ground forces graduates. The top three ground forces graduates selected the engineer branch. Although there was no armor branch at the time, Knowlton took the first and only slot in the cavalry armored force that was offered to his class. His other classmates who wanted to join the mechanized forces had to choose from the ten armored infantry slots offered.

By virtue of his class rank, Knowlton was also able to choose his division of assignment. He selected the

7th Armored Division because it was training in the California desert at the time, preparing to deploy to Europe.

Lieutenant Knowlton reported in to 1/40th Armor in early May 1943 at the Desert Training Center. Knowlton remembered clearly the "officer professional development program" his battalion commander prepared for him as he arrived in the unit. Lieutenant Colonel Ed McConnell, whom Knowlton described as an officer of great intellect and an ability to outsmart the enemy beyond anyone he



In the summer of 1942, Cadet Knowlton was an acting platoon leader with the 77th Reconnaissance Troop at Fort Jackson, S.C.

ever met, called the new lieutenant into his office and said, "You are going to take off those bars and I'm going to put you in the motor pool pulling engines in and out of tanks. You'll be under a T-4 (a soldier of rank equal to what is now a specialist) and he will train you."

Knowlton was deflated. He felt he had worked hard to earn those bars

and now he was told to remove them and become subordinate to a young enlisted man. He spent the next two weeks pulling engines from M2 tanks, tearing them apart, reassembling them, and putting them back in the tanks.

LTC McConnell then gave his fresh West Pointer a new assignment. McConnell said, "OK, now I'm going to give you three officers, all of whom outrank you, and all of whom I'm having difficulty with. You're in charge of them and I want you to have them pull engines in and out of tanks for a week or two." Again Knowlton complied and worked with the recalcitrant officers.

Feeling that his new officer had "earned" a platoon, LTC McConnell told Knowlton he was giving him a tank platoon.

"There are five diesel light tanks in this division," McConnell said. "Nobody can make them run. That is now your platoon. It's Thursday, I want to see you Monday going out the gate with us when we leave on maneuvers."

Knowlton responded, "Sir, I don't have any soldiers."

McConnell told Knowlton, "Look out the window. Out there you have a platoon. Some of them are good soldiers; some of them are great troublemakers; one is the regimental barber who has claustrophobia and can't stand it in tanks. It's quite a collection, but I expect you to do great things with them."

Knowlton then asked, "Where are the five tanks?"

McConnell answered, "I don't know. They've been abandoned somewhere in the desert. Find them!"

When he got all the tanks recovered, young Lieutenant Knowlton realized why his commander had him do all that maintenance training. The first thing he had to do was pull the engines out and blow all the sand from the gearshift plates and put them back

together again. These were the only M2 tanks with diesel engines in the battalion; the rest were gasoline models, and this presented the young officer with unique challenges to get the tanks up and running. By Monday morning, Lieutenant Knowlton and his platoon were out on maneuvers with the battalion.

Lieutenant Knowlton was reassigned to the reconnaissance company as the division moved to Fort Benning in August. On June 6, 1944, the 7th Armored Division set sail from the states for England, just as the invasion of Normandy was getting under way.

Once the Seventh Armored Division arrived in England, his unit drew equipment and commenced training on the Salisbury Plain. In August 1944, they landed at Normandy and joined Patton's Third Army. Knowlton fought with the Seventh across Europe from Normandy to the Baltic Sea.

Knowlton's most famous achievement in the war came in May 1945 shortly before V-E Day. He was called to report to combat command headquarters in Ludwigslust and given these orders. "Take your troops and contact the Russians. They are somewhere to the east, between 50 and 100 miles, according to rumor. Get someone from their staff and bring him here. The German 12th Army lies between you and the Russians. If you get into trouble, we can send you no help. Do not get too entangled, and keep us informed of your progress. Good luck."

Knowlton briefed his reconnaissance troop on the mission and set out with only 65 men on a 60-mile trek through German lines to make the first Allied contact with the Russian Forces North of Berlin. He approached the German positions with such boldness that they could only think he was the lead unit of a much larger force. He ordered German soldiers to throw down their weapons and surrender, and they would comply. The Germans could not imagine a force as small as Knowlton's could



Lieutenant Knowlton, on the right, and members of B Co., 87th Cavalry, on a German hillside in 1945. They were waiting for artillery fire to lift before moving dismounted into a village.

possibly operate independently. In this way, Lieutenant Knowlton bluffed his way through German positions, even fooling a German corps commander, disarming several hundred thousand German soldiers, and taking over three cities enroute to his historic link up with the Russians.

Knowlton was awarded the Silver Star for his heroic actions on this mission. The complete details of this daring dash across the Elbe to the Russian lines is recorded in the August 1945 *Reader's Digest* and was reprinted in the March-April 1989 issue of *ARMOR* Magazine.

In 1949, Captain Knowlton came to Fort Knox for the Armor Officer Advanced Course, and taught tactics at the Armor School for two months while awaiting an assignment to Yale for graduate school. But when hostilities in Korea flared, Knowlton was sent to Fort Sill to teach Armor tactics at the Artillery School. That assignment lasted only three months and he

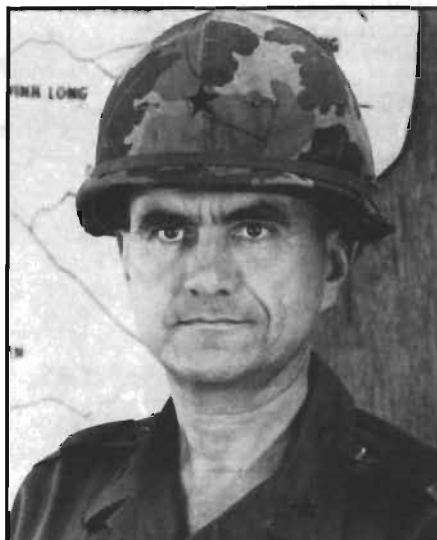
was called upon, by name, to serve on General Eisenhower's staff at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe.

In 1958, following an assignment as an associate professor at West Point, Lieutenant Colonel Knowlton was posted to Fort Meade to take command of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. This was the same unit he trained with in the summer of 1934 at the age of 14, 24 years earlier in Vermont.

When Knowlton arrived at Fort Meade, he recalled having a bunch of bright young West Point lieutenants in his unit. One was named Carl Vuono, who went on to become Chief of Staff of the Army; another was Dick Stevenson, an Army aviator who became a major general; and another was Tim Murchison, who became a highly decorated armored cavalry commander in Vietnam.

Following a tour as the military attache in Tunisia, Knowlton returned to

Seen at right as a brigadier general in Vietnam in 1968, General Knowlton was on General Westmoreland's staff and later commanded two brigades of the 9th ID in the Mekong Delta. Below, he addresses troops of the Berlin Brigade.



Fort Knox in 1963 to command the First Armored Training Brigade. Knowlton's unit won the 2d Army maintenance inspection award.

"We were just getting the M60 tanks at the time so we had both M48s and M60s," Knowlton said. "We set up a program where the soldiers would prepare the tanks at their level for the maintenance inspection. Then I formed a team of about 35 sergeants to go through the tanks. Each sergeant was assigned to look at two or three of the common major deficiencies and he would check every tank for those deficiencies. After all the sergeants went through the tanks, we were ready."

In 1964, Knowlton went to work in the office of the Chief of Staff of the Army and, after a year there, was assigned to Secretary of Defense McNamara's office, replacing a lieutenant colonel named Al Haig who was moving on to the War College. After another year at the Pentagon,

Colonel Knowlton "escaped" to Vietnam by way of a persistent volunteer statement.

Knowlton was promoted to Brigadier General in October 1966 and spent about a year and a half on General Westmoreland's staff working with the CORDS program. In 1968, he was named Commanding General of the 9th Division's two brigades in the Delta region of Vietnam. "One brigade rode in armored boats, and we tried armor tactics on the rivers down there," he recalls. Two more Silver Stars were awarded him in that period.

When General Westmoreland was named Chief of Staff, he brought Knowlton back to the Pentagon with him. Knowlton stayed there two years until Westmoreland named him, in 1970, to replace Lieutenant General Koster as Superintendent at West Point in the wake of the Mai Lai investigations.

Knowlton went on to become the Chief of Staff for European Command and later, the Commanding General of Allied Land Forces Southeast Europe. General Knowlton's final Army assignment was as the military representative to NATO's Military Committee. General Knowlton retired from the Army in June 1980, the senior armor officer on active duty at the time.

Since General Knowlton's retirement from the active army, he continues to serve the nation's industrial and military sectors. He has served on executive boards and as a consultant to a number of large corporations, and he continues to instruct at the National Defense University during the CAPSTONE course for newly appointed general officers.

General Knowlton is the Honorary Colonel of the 40th Armored Regiment and, in recognition of his life-long contributions to the Armor Force, was awarded the prestigious Gold Medallion of the Order of Saint George at the 1988 Armor Conference.

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin T. Kelley was commissioned in Armor in 1976 from the U.S. Military Academy. A graduate of AOB, AOAC, and CGSC, he served as a tank platoon leader, scout platoon leader and company XO with 2-67 Armor; as C Co. commander and battalion ops officer, 1-32 Armor; as XO for 1-63 Armor (OPFOR), and as ops officer for 177th Separate Armored Brigade at the NTC; as asst. professor of Military Science at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., where he earned a Masters Degree in Business Administration; and most recently, as Public Affairs Officer for the U.S. Army Armor Center. He currently commands, 5th Sqdn, 16th Cav at Ft. Knox.