

The History of OCS at Fort Knox

From the *OCS at Fort Knox* website

Background:

For the first 140 years of our Nation's history West Point was able to provide the professional officer corps for our small regular standing army. During military build ups for the War of 1812, the Mexican American War, the Civil War, and the Spanish American War the State Militias and Volunteer Units often elected officers from leaders in their local community. The few military colleges/academies provided an additional resource for officers. The large scale mobilization for World War I created a need for a large number of officers. In 1916 Congress enacted the National Defense Act of 1916 which created the Reserve Officer's Training Corps to create a pool of reserve officers who would serve during times of need. These officers would not be available until 1920. The Secretary of War then proposed changing several civilian training camps into officer training camps. The camps became known as Officer Candidate Schools and were held at various military installations. Officer candidates received three months of intensive training in leadership and other subjects needed to prepare them to lead men in combat. By June of 1918, almost 60,000 graduates had been commissioned in the Army. At the time of the Armistice there were almost 50,000 candidates enrolled in the last of the schools.

Graduates of these World War One training programs were soon dubbed "90 Day Wonders" because of the three month length of the class. It was the experience gained in World War One that led to the program and methods used in OCS ever since. The concept for Army officer training at officer candidate schools is now over one hundred years old. Because of the successful record those early officer candidate schools achieved during World War One, when they quickly produced officers when needed, they were again activated during World War Two, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam.

The First Time: World War Two - 1941-1945:

The War Department envisioned an Army of some 4,000,000 men. By the end of the war almost 8.5 million men would serve in the Army. 19,000 officers had come from the National Guard, and 18,000 from the Officers' Reserve Corps, but 280,000 were produced by the Army through the training of enlisted men who became officers. To get these officers, General George C. Marshall ordered the formation of Officer Candidate Schools in the various branches including Armor.

As tank warfare's importance grew, the Army turned to Fort Knox to produce Armor officers sufficient to lead the tank battalions that would be part of 16 armored divisions, plus 65 independent tank battalions. The mastermind of the new armored force was a former cavalry officer, MG Adna R. Chaffee, Jr. Chaffee, (biography of MG Chaffee) whose headquarters was at Fort Knox. In July, 1940, the first men began to arrive at Fort Knox. On July 25, 1940, Lieutenant Colonel

(later Major General) Stephen Henry was directed to plan, organize and operate an armored forces school. The Secretary of War approved the school on September 19 and the school became the place for doctrine development and armor education. The first classes of Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox graduated in August 1941. The school continued to produce new officers until it was closed after the last classes which entered in November, 1944, graduated. The graduates had undergone the basic phase, plus additional training totaling 17 weeks to emerge as second lieutenants. Officially, OCS at Fort Knox produced 11,349 officers. While most of these served in armored units, many led anti-tank units and other units necessary to support the mobile force the United States produced, probably the most mobile force of the war.

The Second Time: The Korean War - 1951-1953:

The United States entered the Korean War as the greatest military power in the world. The Army, which had been reduced from 8.5 million personnel in August, 1945, still had a strength of some 600,000 troops. However, this force was located in several places around the world, particularly in Europe. The 111,430 in Japan, the Philippines, and Okinawa were not enough to fight the battles in Korea. In June, 1950, the United States had a reserve corps of 217,435 officers and 291,182 enlisted men. The Pentagon quickly realized that the numbers of World War Two veterans and young officers produced by West Point and college ROTC programs would be insufficient to lead the platoons and companies formed as the Army expanded. Planners thus reinstated Officer Candidate School, in February, 1951. The reactivated program was 22 weeks long, up from the 17 weeks of World War Two. By the end of 1952, the Army had commissioned more than 15,000 officers through OCS. The need for an increasing number of mobile troops for use both in Korea and on the plains of Europe caused the Army to open OCS at Fort Knox a second time on September 28, 1951. As Captain Thomas J. Canavan observed in his essay "Let's Keep Armor OCS" (paper, United States Army Armor School, 1967):

The program was to consist of 11 classes with 100 candidates per class. This time, however, they were to receive 22 weeks of training - a five week increase over World War II O.C.S. (sic) In addition, a class was to graduate every other week. At first, these goals were not reached. The first three classes had more than 100 candidates and started about one month apart. It was not until the fourth class that the Officer Candidate School was able to proceed as planned. The program was retained at Fort Knox until 12 May 1953, during which time 1,256 lieutenants received commissions. Thus, on May 12, 1953, the Army closed OCS at Fort Knox a second time. One side note of interest is that while officer candidates were housed in the large red brick barracks (now offices) on main post during World War Two and Vietnam, Captain Canavan says the candidates in 1951-1953 were housed in wooden barracks north of the Armor School, possibly near where Boudinot Hall now stands.

The Third Time: The Vietnam War - 1960-1972:

During Vietnam the United States Army was called upon to quickly train some 375,000 troops and then to deploy them to Southeast Asia, the continental United States, Europe, Korea, and elsewhere around the world. To lead this force, about 40,000 new officers were needed, a 40 percent increase in the pre-war officer corps. The expansion of the officer corps had to take place between 1965 and 1969 and had to be accomplished in a shorter time period than that which had occurred during the much larger World War Two expansion. The main source of these new officers was Officer Candidate School. About ten percent of these needed officers were trained at the Armor School at Fort Knox, Kentucky, between December, 1965, and March, 1968.

On August 26, 1965, the Department of the Army ordered the Armor School at Fort Knox to activate an Officer Candidate School. The OCS there was one of the first to get underway. The Officer Candidate School itself was under the direction of the Assistant Commandant of the Armor School, Brigadier General Albin Irzyk. BG Irzyk was a famed armor battalion commander who during World War Two served under General George S. Patton, and alongside future General Creighton Abrams. BG Irzyk was Assistant Commandant throughout most of the life of the Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox and he took special interest in it and its product. Though most candidates did not know it at the time, his spirit and dedication would be stamped on each of them. Following his assignment at the Armor School, General Irzyk returned to Vietnam for his second tour where he played a key role in saving Saigon during the TET Offensive in the spring of 1968.

Because the Armor School was among the first to establish an OCS, the Army stipulated that during its first fiscal year of operation from 1 October, 1965, through 30 June, 1966, the school was to train some students only for the thirteen week branch immaterial curriculum common to all Officer Candidate Schools while retaining others for an additional ten weeks of training as Armor officers. Those sent elsewhere finished their training in Transportation, Ordnance, or Quartermaster branch schools. After July 1, 1966, the Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox prepared only Armor officers through a full 23 week long course. The last OCS class at Fort Knox graduated on February 23, 1968. For the period December, 1965, through February, 1968, Fort Knox OCS trained and commissioned 3,354 second lieutenants in Armor, 21 in the Transportation Corps, ten in the Ordnance Branch and seven in the Quartermaster Corps. In addition, 929 individuals completed thirteen weeks of Fort Knox OCS Phase I training before being sent to Ordnance, Quartermaster, or Transportation branch school. 4,321 men completed Officer Candidate School in the Officer Candidate Brigade of the United States Army Armor School at Fort Knox, Kentucky and then served their Nation during the Vietnam Era. 115 graduates as a result of service in Vietnam were killed in action, died of wounds, or died from service related injuries.

