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FROM A COLD LOCATION TO A COLD WAR: THE 8147TH ARMY UNIT'S MOUNTAINEERING INSTRUCTORS

Kallee Knox

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In June 1953, Thomas Paul Knox received word that he would be leaving his position as a military policeman in Korea to become an acting military policeman in Honshu, Japan, instead. Shortly after arriving in Honshu, Knox was selected to become one of the first members of a newly developed school named the 8147th Army Unit Mountain Training School. This new unit was a descendant of the 10th Mountain Division, which had specialized in mountaineering warfare during World War II. Colonel Hazel Link, an active member of the 10th Mountain Division who had served as a tank commander under General George S. Patton, was the Commandant of the new school. Because of his excellent background in mountaineering and warfare, he knew that the United States military would need a special group of men with the same skills and abilities he was once taught. Link would say about his students, "When they arrive, they will be afraid of the mountain and won't want to take the training," but once students completed their mountaineering training, he told them, "We won't be able to keep you off of it."¹ Knox became one of the first students at the Mountain Training School, alongside Fred Lodien, who had also served as a military policeman in the Korean War. Knox and Lodien did not serve beside each other in Korea, but quickly became close friends through the 8147th Army Unit Mountain Training School. Robert Thomson was also one of the few men selected for the 8147th Army Unit, and, after extensive and intense training, all three men became part of the very first group of instructors for the 8147th Army Unit Mountain Training School. Together, they impacted the future of mountaineering warfare for all branches of the United States military.

The tension between the United States and the Union of

Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) became a growing issue following the end of the Korean War. The United States had clear reasons to believe that China, who had formed a wartime alliance with the United States in 1942, might now side with the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong, a Chinese communist activist and leader, was leading a revolution within China and had a negative approach towards President Truman and his administration. The United States was focused on containing the territorial expansion of the Soviet Union in Europe, but the state of affairs in Asia caused President Truman and his administration to "seek a more realistic and pragmatic policy" with the Asian countries.² The intent of this policy was to prevent hostilities among countries like China, who supported modern-day North Korea, both during and following the Korean War. The United States had already placed troops in many of the prefectures of Japan to act as a deterrent to the spread of communism. With the growing tension from the Soviet Union, in addition to its uncertain relationship with both China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), the United States needed to maintain a positive relationship with Japan. The United States desperately needed an active presence within the Asian continent to increase its sphere of democratic influence.

Many members of the U.S. military, who were already stationed in various parts of Japan, could sense an upcoming war with the Soviet Union. Arthur Thomas was stationed in Honshu, Japan, and was an editor for the Honshu Pioneer, one of the first government-issued newspapers. He frequently interviewed American soldiers who were stationed in Japan and often released claims from U.S. soldiers who believed

a war could break out and knew that trouble was ahead.³ Similarly to the soldiers in Honshu, many U.S. forces stationed in Hokkaido, Japan, were planning for a potential war with the Soviet Union. Hokkaido is eight hundred and sixty-three miles from Honshu, but both islands played significant roles in the hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union. Hokkaido itself is very close to the Soviet Union. To put the distance between Hokkaido and Russia in perspective, in 2017, a twenty-eight-mile bridge was proposed that would connect the Russian island of Sakhalin to the northern area of Hokkaido. Because of its proximity to Russia, the United States heavily occupied Hokkaido following the end of the Korean War. The U.S. occupational forces were concerned about tensions with the Soviet Union and were even more concerned with “the future of an island where they did not accept any Soviet forces.”⁴ The idea behind this claim was that the United States’ presence would stop the Soviet Union from invading Japan, despite being so close geographically. Additionally, both Honshu and Hokkaido played significant roles in the development of the 8147th Army Unit’s Mountain Training School, as these areas became heavily populated with U.S. military personnel, among them Thomas P. Knox, Fred Lodien, and Robert Thomson, following the end of the Korean War and the unfortunate beginning of a new type of war.

Colonel Hazel Link’s background in mountaineering and winter warfare during World War II taught him the importance of and need for men who were skilled in these areas, which is why he developed the 8147th Army Unit Mountain Training School. Knox, Lodien, and Thomson were three of Colonel Link’s first picks to join the school and learn the skills necessary to become mountaineering experts. Knox and Lodien shared common interests and quickly became close friends during their training. Knox was born and raised on his family farm in Sardis, Alabama—a little town with one



Members of the 8147th Army Unit team practicing and teaching rescue operations in case of any medical emergencies. Thomas Knox pictured on the far left. Photo courtesy of Fred Lodien.

small schoolhouse for the limited number of children who lived in the area. An important aspect of Sardis is that it has no mountains, just a few hills. Fred Lodien, who grew up in Scandia, Minnesota, shared this trait with Knox. When the two met, they quickly realized that neither man had any training or background in mountaineering. Fred Lodien recalls how some of the most important aspects of their training included learning how to properly rappel, which is where one controls their descent off a vertical drop or a rockface. The first half of their training took place at the Mountain Climbing School within Camp Weir, located in Honshu. Lodien said that the initial training included rappelling down the walls of empty swimming pools and jumping out of treetops onto fixed lines.⁵ After successful training in the Mountain Climbing School, the group of men traveled to the Winter Warfare School, located in Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan. This became the perfect location for winter warfare training due to its geographic location and climate. When Hokkaido was first settled, the harsh winters forced neighbors to work together to combat the extreme weather in order to survive.⁶

Hokkaido's towering mountains and extreme winters created the perfect winter warfare preparation site. The men of the 8147th Army Unit knew that although they had learned so much at Camp Weir, their mountaineering and winter warfare training was anything but over.

Robert Thomson, who was born and raised in Utah, had experienced cold weather before, but recalled that it was absolutely nothing compared to what he experienced in the mountains of Hokkaido. Their training camps were placed in the mountains to provide the most realistic and intense scenarios. Thomson said that when measuring the snow at the Winter Warfare School, he would make sure to measure the snow in feet instead of inches, as the snow always totaled more than twelve inches.⁷ Here, the training of the 8147th Army Unit included tactical skiing, wartime preparation within the mountains, and creating spots for their tents so that they would be able to sleep in the mountains at night. After learning the basics of winter warfare, the men would leave every Monday morning to go into the mountain's training fields, train throughout the week, and then return to the base camp on Friday night. While in the field, the men would learn about the difference between rappelling the face of a mountain during the winter compared to the summer. Completing the Winter Warfare School became a career achievement, as the harsh winters prepared the 8147th Army Unit for various types of mountaineering expeditions. With the Cold War on the horizon, and the men training so close to the Soviet Union, Robert Thomson recalls frequently seeing Soviet aircraft from the mountains of Hokkaido. While Knox, Lodien, and Thomson were training specifically to become instructors, it can be inferred that Colonel Link wanted to revive and replenish both the individual men and the entire units skilled in mountaineering and winter warfare, in case the United States became engaged in combat with the Soviet Union.

Eastern Europe is still known to this day for its unbearably harsh winters, and, as history tells us, battling within Russia's borders during the winter is extremely tough and often impossible. Some of the most notable warfare operations in history were lost within Russia. The 1812 French invasion of Russia led to Napoleon Bonaparte's downfall, as the French Emperor could not overcome the harsh winter weather.

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Russian strategies to prevent the French from securing any goods or victories, combined with the geographic features unique to Russia, decimated French troops. Like Napoleon, Adolf Hitler also attempted to conquer Russia during the Second World War. Russian geographic topography and extreme cold resulted in failure for the German dictator, which ultimately ruined his plans for worldwide domination. The United States could sense war, and, if the Soviet Union pushed the U.S. too far, they were determined to have men trained to do battle in the harsh climate and mountainous terrain of Eastern Europe.

After completing their strenuous training, the men became 8147th Army Unit Mountain Training School instructors. They

would travel between Honshu and Hokkaido as they trained the men within their unit and those either outside the unit or within another military branch. The unit ranged from ninety to one hundred men at any one time—extremely small compared to a regular Army unit. Colonel Link knew the importance of this group of men and their training abilities, so when it came time to gather supplies or select food for the mess hall, he ordered Joe Adcock, the mess-hall sergeant, to choose only the best food for such a great group of men.⁸ While most members of the 8147th Army Unit originated from all over the continental United States, the Unit Medical Officer's home was only twenty miles from Thomas P. Knox's childhood home. Dr. Dodson Curry, the acting medical doctor for the small unit, was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. Dr. Curry was trained in mountaineering and winter warfare, in case the team had a medical emergency during their four-week training periods or during any future team missions. He spent most of his time with the unit at the Mountain Training School in Camp Weir. Recalling his time with the unit, Dr. Curry continuously emphasized that the 8147th Army Unit was "elite" and specialized, meaning that not many military servicemen existed with the job of training others in the area of mountaineering and winter warfare.⁹ Even though the 8147th Army Unit was small compared to most, its purpose and objectives clearly benefited the United States as growing tensions with the Soviet Union increased.

Thomas P. Knox, Fred Lodien, and Robert Thomson were often split between the school at Camp Weir and the other location in Hokkaido, so that each man could train their own group. As trainers, they were often called mountaineering specialists. At this time in his Army career, Knox was a Private First Class. He was instructed to teach absolutely any soul who came to the mountain training school, as the United States desperately needed soldiers trained in this field. This meant that Knox, a Private, was able to give orders and teach

anyone in the military, and he frequently trained military officers who were ranked as Majors.¹⁰ The instructors trained men from the other military branches such as the Marines or the Navy, as well as women within the forces.

Steve Coulson, stationed in Japan after the Korean War ceasefire and a member of the 187th Regimental Combat Team, had seen an open slot within his company to attend the Mountain Training School and excitedly signed up for the spot. Coulson arrived at Camp Weir for the first four-week course and remembered the exhilarating environment. When recalling the training period, Coulson stated, "ground training came first. We learned about pitons [metal spikes that are driven into the mountainside for support], knot tying, and then hiked eight miles up the mountain where we learned how to save our legs."¹¹ Coulson stated that the initial training lasted about a week. Then he was ready to learn how to free-base rock climb, which meant that he was taught how to use only his hands to climb the slope. Following this training, Coulson and his small group were taught how to rappel down the mountainside using a two-hundred-and twenty-foot rope. In order to successfully learn this skill, the men would hike about seven miles up the mountain, then rappel down to the base camp. The ropes would be looped into a half, meaning that the men would only rappel about one hundred feet down at a time, while driving pitons into the mountainside for stability. It was crucial for any student at the Mountain Training School to learn these skills during the day, but Coulson also remembers night climbing and training to find survival resources during the night. He had rappelled out of helicopters numerous times while serving in the Army but stated that it was "nothing like rappelling down a mountain."¹² The extensive training these men endured at Camp Weir served a purpose: in order to have skilled mountaineering service members, it was vital to go through every aspect and scenario possible. Because there was little demand for mountaineering troops prior to

the end of the Korean War, there were very few servicemen who had these skills. With the possibility of fighting in Eastern Europe, the skills became desperately needed. Men like Steve Coulson learned lifelong skills that might not be necessary for a routine day job, but if needed, his skills would have proven to be very useful on an Eastern warfront, had the men ever needed to endure the brutal weather or topography.



Members of the 8147th Army Unit team learning tactical warfare as they carried their weapons at the Winter Warfare School located in Hokkaido, Japan. Photo courtesy of Fred Lodien.

Training men to be skilled in mountaineering and winter warfare was extremely important; however, the unit had few medical professionals trained in these tactics. This led the 8147th Army Unit to include specialized women in the program. The women who required mountaineering training were almost always nurses within the different military branches. While these nurses were skilled in general healthcare, they also needed to learn how to treat the wounded in extreme winter weather, as well as how to get to an individual on the mountain in case of any injuries. While most of the women who arrived at the Winter Warfare School could not begin to build a campsite, let alone a fire, they were

soon taught the important skills needed to survive in the mountains. When training at the Winter Warfare School, the instructors taught their female trainees basic survival skills, such as how to kill, clean, and cook various wild animals. *Stars and Stripes*, the official newspaper of the U.S. armed forces, interviewed some of the nurses who trained under Knox, Lodien, and Thomson. These nurses recalled that “most of the training period is spent in the field where they learn to build improvised shelters, trap food, build fires and even cook.”¹³ The nurses’ training also helped them understand how to act and get to other U.S. soldiers if these soldiers ever encountered problems while fighting in the mountains. The *Stars and Stripes* reporter referred to the training at the Winter Warfare School as “the toughest school in Japan” due to the difficult and specialized four-week course.¹⁴ Without discrediting the hard work needed to complete the mountaineering school at Camp Weir, the Winter Warfare School was easily one of the most specific and desired training programs for the United States service-people, as the likelihood of a warfront in Eastern Europe seemed inevitable. By training nurses in mountaineering and winter warfare tactics, the United States was preparing servicemen and servicewomen for all possibilities and areas of cold-weather warfare, where they would be adequately trained to save the lives of wounded soldiers while surviving extreme environmental conditions.

The 8147th Army Unit Mountain Training School is one of many military histories that has not been adequately explored. Men like Thomas P. Knox, Robert Thomson, and Dr. Dodson Curry went on to perform recovery missions while still in the service. Knox, Thomson, and Curry recovered the remains of Navy servicemen whose small airplane crashed into the Japanese Alps. Their preparation and time spent as instructors and medical staff at the Winter Warfare School in Hokkaido trained them for this mission, and all three men

were able to give the servicemen's families some closure. Knox then went on a separate recovery mission to a small island in the Mariana Island chain, called Agrihan. Robert Thomson was also part of this recovery mission, where a small team of men were ordered to rappel into the crater of a semiactive volcano and recover the remains of servicemen whose plane had crashed there while they were conducting search and rescue for a missing hurricane hunter plane. The team successfully recovered what they could from the crash and completed their mission without any injuries, despite rappelling into a semi-active volcano. The skills of the men of the 8147th Army Unit proved that they were prepared for more than winter warfare as they completed two recovery missions after their time as trainers.

Thankfully, the Cold War did not include any physical



Members of the 8147th Army Unit assemble for a group photo that was taken in the early 1950s at the Mountain Training School located within Camp Weir in Honshu, Japan. First row, seated: Colonel Hazel Link, fourth from the left; Fred Lodien, seventh from the left. Fourth row, standing: Thomas Knox, far right (only head and neck visible). Photo courtesy of author.

battles within the mountainous areas of Eastern Europe, but the servicemen of the United States were prepared in case

physical war broke out. Nothing but positive remarks have been made about the instructors of the 8147th Army Unit. Steve Coulson stated that, while at the Mountain Training School in Honshu, "the instructors were hardcore and dedicated. They did a great job."¹⁵ Coulson is not the only man to have high remarks for the 8147th Army Unit's instructors. Those interviewed by the *Stars and Stripes* reporter also

“ Without discrediting the hard work needed to complete the mountaineering school at Camp Weir, the Winter Warfare School was easily one of the most specific and desired training programs for the United States service-people, as the likelihood of a warfront in Eastern Europe seemed inevitable.

asserted that “the instructors were serious about their work and didn't fool around; they were conscientious and take an individual interest in their students, important since the student's life is often in danger.”¹⁶ The small group of men that made up the 8147th Army Unit Mountain Training School dedicated a large portion of their careers to teaching others the specialized skills of both mountaineering and winter warfare. While most of the servicemen and women who learned these survival and tactical skills were not able to go on specific mountaineering missions, the United States had men readily prepared in these skills that could be useful in a variety of different situations. After being honorably discharged, Thomas P. Knox left the army as a Sergeant and returned home to Sardis, Alabama. Thomas Paul Knox

passed away in January 2002, and Fred Lodien passed away in February 2019. Dr. Dodson Curry passed away in July 2018, five years after Thomas A. Knox had reached out to him for an interview. Robert Thomson, one of the longest-living members of the unit, passed away in early 2020. The legacy left behind by each member of the 8147th Army Unit will not be forgotten, as their contributions to the United States prove their significance, dedication, and bravery. While the

United States and Colonel Hazel Link may have been training servicemen and women with the intent of possible war within the mountains and during the winters of Eastern Europe, the 8147th Army Unit instead created specialized members from all walks of life who would be able to skillfully show their craft as mountaineering and winter warfare experts.

ENDNOTES

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