

Soldiers of the High Country

by Peter Daniel Davis

Courtesy U.S. Army Center of Military History



The 10th Mountain Division in World War II

Late in September of 1944, the American Fifth Army slammed through the Futa and Il Giogo Passes in Italy. East of the

Fifth Army, the British Eighth Army had run through Rimini and was fighting northward, following the Adriatic coast. But the Apennine Mountains could not be taken — not until the Americans had won Mount Belvedere. Only fifteen miles southwest of Bologna, the German mountaintop fortification had a clear view of Highway 64, the region's only north-south thoroughway. Highway 64 also led to what Napoleon had called "Europe's granary" — the Po River Valley, a crucial food source for Germany. First though, it would be necessary to take Riva Ridge — a row of mountains to the south where the German artillery observers had a good view of Mount Belvedere. Running north to south, the ridge could easily be resupplied from the German side on the west end where the slopes were less steep. But it was thought impossible to climb Riva Ridge. General George P. Hayes, however, had a different view — climb the ridge at night.



Rocca Cornetta Area, Italy. The morning and afternoon preceding the attack on Mount Serrasiccia, the men of the 86th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, trained for mountain fighting, laid down in an Appenine snow bank and slept. 18 Feb 1945.

Almost five years earlier in November 1939, the Russian army had invaded Finland. The Finns fought back with Molotov cocktails, fleeing on cross-country skis—or even ice skates when they were near lakes. Though vastly outnumbered, they succeeded in destroying two Soviet tank divisions before they were finally overwhelmed by attacks on the Karelian Isthmus and from the Gulf of Finland. Charles Minot “Minnie” Dole had been inspired by the initial successes of the Finnish troops. An avid skier himself, and an Army veteran, he had—years earlier—seen a crucial need for giving rapid first-aid to recreational skiers after he had suffered a serious injury on the slopes and had lost a friend to injuries from a skiing accident. These experiences led to his founding the National Ski Patrol. He began writing hundreds of letters,

lobbying the Army to create a mountain division adept at climbing in winter conditions, and trained in the use of skis and snowshoes. Eventually, he succeeded with the help of General George C. Marshall.

On December 8, 1941, the 87th Mountain Infantry Battalion, later the 87th Regiment, was activated by the Army at Fort Lewis, Washington, training on the 14,408 foot high Mount Rainier. Their instructors included expatriate European skiers. Possibly the most famous of them was a champion Norwegian ski jumper named Torger Tøkle, who was so strong he could jump up onto the tailgate of a truck from a standing position while wearing a sixty-pound pack. The 87th would later become the 10th Light Division, along with the 85th and 87th

Infantry Regiments, training at 9,200 feet in the difficult conditions of Mount Hale, Colorado. Among the soldiers was a young naturalist named Stuart Abbot who arrived at Camp Hale in December 1943. He would carry a notebook and tree guide, writing down field observations of which evergreens would appear at different elevations.

As well as skis and snowshoes, a variety of unconventional hardware was introduced for mountain climbing. This included crampons, which are sharp cleats on pairs of metal frames that attached to the soles of climbing boots. There was also climbing rope made of a new kind of material called nylon.

The 87th Regiment was the first to see action against Japan in the Aleutian Islands. It was unclear to the Americans why the Japanese would want to occupy these islands, which were close to Alaska, but the notion that they might use them to stage an invasion of Alaska and more southern points could not be ruled out. After the 7th Division had taken heavy losses winning the island of Attu, General Marshall decided to send the 87th Regiment, which had trained for cold, mountainous

Members of the 10th Mountain Division's 1st Brigade, which over the past two years have served in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Uzbekistan, were deployed to Afghanistan in October 2001. In 2003, members of Task Force Warrior, composed of members of the 10th Mountain Division's 1st Brigade, replaced troops of the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan confronting Al Qaeda and Taliban forces as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. Later, in 2003, members of the Division's 1st Brigade received deployment orders to join 700 Division troops in Iraq that are to redeploy to Fort Drum. At the present time, the 10th Mountain Division continues to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan, battling terrorism and training the Afghan National Army. On October 3, 2003, the Division observed the 10-year anniversary of its rescuing Special Operations Task Force Ranger in Mogadishu City, Somalia that was portrayed in the book and movie "Blackhawk Down".

—Brian Insolo



During the air preparation of the big "push" in Italy by the U.S. Fifth Army, the men, mules, and armor of the 10th Mountain Division and supporting tank units move forward between 8:30 A.M. and 9:10 A.M., 14 April 1945. Bologna, Italy.

conditions, to take the island of Kiska. But shortly after they landed, on August 15, 1943, they discovered that the Japanese had already left.

The 10th Light Division was redesignated the 10th Mountain Division on November 6, 1944. In December, almost 14,000 soldiers were transported to Europe via converted passenger ships and an army transport boat. They included the 85th, 86th, and 87th Regiments, three artillery battalions, the 126th Engineer Mountain Battalion, and a battalion with medics, ambulance drivers, and veterinarians to attend to the division's pack mules.

On the night of February 18, 1945, five single-file columns from the 86th Mountain Infantry climbed Riva Ridge, running phone lines as they went so they could maintain radio silence. Soldiers carried double the usual



Men in Company F, 86th Mountain Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, advance after air and artillery preparation in big “push” on Bologna, Italy. 14 April 1945.

amount of ammo; even officers were obliged to each carry three mortar shells. They did, however, need to do without the winter sleeping bags and many of them also had to forsake the winter climbing boots that had been developed for them. Neither item had been shipped from the United States. But with the element of surprise on their side, the Americans were able to take the ridge with lighter casualties than they might have expected: seventeen men were killed, fifty-one were wounded, and three were reported missing. It was no easy task carrying the wounded down, but with the ridge taken, the 85th Regiment was now able to take Mount Belvedere and Mount Gorgolesco. This time the losses were high, with 926 casualties, including the young naturalist Stuart Abbott, killed by an exploding shell.

In April 1945, the 10th Mountain Division pushed on toward the Po River Valley. They reached the Valley early on April 20th, taking 1,283 casualties after five days of fighting. The 10th became the first division to reach the Po River on the morning of April 23rd. Under fire, the 87th Mountain Infantry succeeded in making the crossing using fifty light canvas assault boats.

The 10th was finally able to cut off the German Army’s main escape route to the Brenner Pass when they reached the south

end of Lake Garda. They worked their way northward on foot under machine gun fire and in amphibious vehicles on the lake taking shelling from German artillery. One of the amphibious vehicles flipped in heavy winds, drowning twenty-four soldiers. A German shell landed fifty feet inside a highway tunnel where Americans had taken shelter, killing seven and wounding forty-four soldiers. But the Americans succeeded in capturing two towns at the head of the lake, Riva and Tarbole. The Germans were retreating northward into the mountains. They had fought the last battle in Italy. On Wednesday, May 2 at 6:30 P.M., it was announced on radio that the German army in Italy had surrendered. Over the 114 days the 10th Mountain Division served in combat, 992 were killed in

action and 4,154 were wounded. One of the dead was the Norwegian ski jumper Torger Tokle.

Most of the young men killed or wounded were never known beyond their families, friends, and the communities where they came from. Yet the accomplishments of the 10th Mountain Division will always be remembered. And although the strategic importance of their sacrifice in Italy toward winning the war in Europe has often been debated, the courage of those who took Riva Ridge and Mount Belvedere was never in doubt.

Two excellent books on the 10th Mountain Division in World War II, *The Last Ridge* by McKay Jenkins, and *Climb To Conquer* by Peter Shelton are both available from book vendors on GSA Schedule 76, Publication Media.

Sources

The Fort Drum and 10th Mountain Division homepage is available at www.drum.army.mil

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