

# The Tenth Mountain Division

## A Successful Experiment

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THE 10th Mt. Division was a good division, but many others with inferior training and equipment suffered more casualties, fought more campaigns, and killed or captured more Germans. Logically, then, the training and equipping of mountain troops hardly seems to be worth while. Infantry divisions without special training certainly did a wonderful job in Italy and broke the back of enemy resistance there before the 10th Mountain Division ever landed. Then, why all the fuss? Were the time and money spent on mountain and winter training justified? Yes, because in the short time our mountain troops were in combat in Italy they made an impressive record of offensive warfare, despite operations in exceedingly rough and mountainous terrain.

At the beginning of World War II certain officers in the War Department recognized the fact that troops require specialized training to operate successfully under conditions of snow and extreme cold. As a result, early in 1940, Lt. Col. Nelson M. Walker and Lt. Col. Charles E. Hurdis<sup>1</sup> were given the task of exploring the possibilities of ski troops.

Almost immediately it was apparent that winter operations were impossible without suitable clothing and equipment, and equally obvious that suitable items were not available in the Quartermaster General's warehouses. In 1940 War Department supply agencies were overwhelmed by the basic problem of feeding and equipping the new citizen army. These imperative needs, and the failure of the Quartermaster Corps to appreciate the close relationship between proper clothing and equipment and successful winter training operations, prevented the supply of necessary winter items through normal channels of supply during that winter. Consequently winter training directives in 1940-41 specified the purchase of civilian items

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<sup>1</sup> To these two officers great credit is due for their part in organizing the first mountain regiment and in encouraging the War Department to continue mountain training in the face of severe criticisms. Both men were given other duties during the middle days of the war, and were unable to continue to give direct aid to mountain training. Later Nelson Walker (then Brig. Gen.) was killed by a German machine gun in France. In him the mountains and all lovers of the mountains lost a true friend. Brig. Gen. Hurdis later served with distinction against the Japanese in the Philippines.

of equipment for very small detachments from units stationed in or near snow country. Of these the Old Forge Ski Patrol from the 44th Division, the 15th Infantry Ski Patrol from the 3rd Division, and the Winter Warfare Training Board project at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, were the most successful.

The terrain of Old Forge, New York; Mt. Rainier, Washington; and Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, had an influence upon the final recommendations of each detachment with respect to certain types of equipment, such as snowshoes, ski climbers, and hand-drawn sleds, but all agreed that suitable equipment and proper training in the use of that equipment were prerequisites for all successful cold weather operations. Thus far very little had been learned concerning training, but equipment needs and deficiencies were coming into sharp focus. Already equipment for the winter of 1941-42 was coming off the production lines, and already much of it was obsolete, for in 1941-42 training plans would not be modified because of equipment deficiencies as had been done the previous winter.

During the summer of 1941 the writer was detailed as an observer with the Wood Yukon Expedition, which was operating in the St. Elias Range, YT, Canada. This was the first official visit of a member of the Armed Forces during World War II to observe the problems of true alpine terrain. At this time equipment testing was less important, and training problems were assuming greater and greater importance to the War Department General Staff. Concepts of different training for mountain operations and for winter operations in flat terrain were being recognized for the first time.

Since a start in winter training had been made at Camp McCoy during 1940-41, the next step was to find out what could be done in mountain training. On 15 November 1941, the 1st Bn., 87th Inf. (Mtn.) was activated at Ft. Lewis, Washington. No training doctrine existed and none of the officers had ever served with mountain troops. The only veteran mountain trooper was one enlisted man who had fought with the Finns against the Russians in the winter of 1940, but all men were enthusiastic "mountain troopers."

The 1st Bn., 87th Inf. (Mtn.) trained at Paradise Valley, Mt. Rainier, Washington, from 15 February to 1 June 1942. Ski training was given and ski proficiency tests were taken in an attempt to determine the minimum proficiency required of a rifleman. In the

light of present experience, it is now realized that much time was wasted teaching skiing, but at that time nobody knew the answers, and the unit followed the directives given it. Alpine equipment was not then available in sufficient quantity for training.

The training on Mt. Rainier crystallized many more problems, and accordingly during the summer of 1942 "over snow" motor equipment was tested on the Columbia Icefields, summer mountain supply was tested at Aspen, Colorado; and the latest Quartermaster clothing and equipment was tested on Mt. McKinley. By the fall of 1942 this phase of experimentation was completed.

A test of the troops trained on Mt. Rainier by extended maneuvers between the 87th Infantry supported by pack artillery, and troops and artillery with standard training and equipment took place at the Hunter-Liggett Military Reservation in the fall of 1942. These were not alpine operations and it was apparent that the training on Mt. Rainier had not benefited the 87th except for the superior stamina of the individual soldier and his willingness to go anywhere across difficult terrain. This maneuver conclusively demonstrated that ski and alpine techniques are of little help in tree-covered mountains.

As mountain and winter training entered its third year, War Department thinking divided the problem into three parts and assigned it the following priorities:

1. Winter Training of Standard Infantry Divisions.
2. Low Mountain Training of Standard Infantry Divisions.
3. Alpine Training of Special Mountain Units.

The expression of this thinking during the next two years in terms of division training was as follows:

1. Winter training at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, of the 2nd Infantry Division, Dec. 1942 to April 1943, and of the 76th Infantry Division, Nov. 1943 to Mar. 1944.

2. Low Mountain Training of the 45th and 36th Infantry Divisions in the Buena Vista, Va., Maneuver Area, Feb.-Apr. 1943.

3. Based upon the success of the 45th and 36th Infantry Divisions in Sicily, the West Virginia Maneuver Area was opened and a steady flow of units through this area was maintained from Aug. 1943 until May 1944.

4. Training of special mountain units stationed at Camp Carson, Colo., and at Camp Hale, Colo., Nov. 1942 to May 1944.

On 19 July, 1943, Nelson Walker's dream came true. The U. S. Army had a mountain division. Almost all of the divisional units had been in existence for some months. Many of the original officers and men had drifted into other and more attractive fields, but those who remained in the 10th Light Division (Mtn.) were impelled by one and only one desire, "To get ready to fight."

There were still many unanswered problems. Tactics were being learned. Supply was a problem, and the men at that time carried loads that no man in combat could carry, but progress was made each time the units took the field, and all training pointed towards the "D" Series.<sup>2</sup>

Even 18 months later, after severe combat in the Italian Apennines, mention of the "D" Series brought awe to the voices of the veterans. Cold, snow, refractory mules, sleepness nights, 14,000 ft. peaks, and hazing from the "brass" combined to produce a situation that batteries of German 88's and later actions could not make men forget. "It's not as bad as the 'D' Series," they later cried, and believed it. For the first time the division functioned as a unit. The XVI Corps sent umpires and the War Department watched closely through observers from all Arms and Services. At the final critique, Maj. Gen. Lloyd E. Jones, Division Commander, stated that never in the history of the U. S. Army had a division undergone such a rigorous training maneuver.

The War Department was now satisfied that it had a trained mountain unit capable of enduring the worst alpine weather, and not afraid to tackle any type of terrain. But could it fight in the flatlands? That is important too. Accordingly, July, 1944, found the mountaineers at Camp Swift, Texas, doing it all over again but without mountains. Texas sand and heat were worse than Colorado's snows, but the units learned to speed up their time and space calculations, and unlimited ammunition allowances improved their marksmanship. Here every man became POM qualified.<sup>3</sup> Maj. Gen. George P. Hayes took command and the division moved out.

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<sup>2</sup> Ground Force Training is progressive from the day a man enters a Replacement Training Center. The first stage is Individual Training, followed by Unit Training, then Combined Unit Training, and finally by the "D" Series (Divisional Maneuver Training). No "D" Series problems existed for a mountain division at any of the posts, camps, stations, or maneuver areas, but the XVI Corps, which was somewhat unfamiliar with the difficulties of mountain maneuvers in winter, drew heavily upon imagination and came up with a series that has become legendary.

<sup>3</sup> POM means "Prepared for Overseas Movement."

The Italian front had been stabilized along the crest of the Apennines in October and November, 1944. At all points from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the British lines near the Adriatic the enemy held higher ground, and at one place he held a large salient anchored on Mt. Belvedere. From Mt. Belvedere he had observation on Highway 64, one of the two main supply routes of the central Italian front. Until the use of Mt. Belvedere was denied German observers, no allied offensive up Highway 64 could be launched successfully.

The key to Mt. Belvedere was the Mancinello-Campiano (Riva) Ridge,<sup>4</sup> which in winter offered truly alpine terrain problems. From this buttress any unit or individual approaching Belvedere from the allied side was under the eyes of German observers. On 19 February, 1945, however, a reinforced battalion of the 86th Mt. Inf. scaled the Mancinello-Campiano Ridge, surprised the German garrison, and completed the first step toward reducing the salient. On 20 February the rest of the 10th Mountain Division jumped off against Mt. Belvedere. Initial objectives were secured by daylight and a week of counterattacks followed before the Division reduced the salient and straightened the line. By 7 March, 1945, the operation was completed.

This first offensive action of the first mountain division of the U. S. Army was significant. Other divisions had twice failed to take Mt. Belvedere. German prisoners later stated that they did not believe that troops could scale Campiano Ridge and arrive in condition to fight.

The loss of observation on Campiano Ridge now forced the Germans to support their counterattacks with unobserved artillery fire on the 10th Infantry's newly won Belvedere positions. The loss of Belvedere knocked out the last observation on this section of Highway 64, and made the salient untenable. From 7 March to 14 April the line had been straightened and preparations for the spring offensive had gone full speed ahead, so that on the jump-off day on the Castle d'Aiano-Riola Line, the division was battle wise, poised and confident. Seven days later the 10th Mt. Division was in the Po Valley, and on 23 April forward elements were across

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<sup>4</sup> See *Italy: The Riva Ridge*, by 1st Lt. Wilson Ware; and *What's Behind That Battle Star*, by Staff Sgt. Hugh Evans, this issue. Troops identified this ridge differently, depending on the proximity of various villages to their assault positions, but it was generally known as the Mancinello-Campiano or Riva ridge.

the Po. Within another week all of Lake Garda and the adjacent country was under 10th Mt. Division control. Pack animals, pack equipment, and special alpine equipment were on their way forward. Preliminary steps had been taken and plans were nearing completion for an alpine campaign to break into the Nazi redoubt. Then the war ended in Italy.

Now, less than five years after Lt. Col. Walker wrote the first directives for the purchase of civilian equipment and the training of ski patrols, the 10th Mt. Division is history. Deactivation was completed 1 December, 1945. An idea had been tried, and a step-child had finally become a first class combat outfit.

The war did not prove that standard U. S. infantry divisions are helpless in the mountains. Nor did it prove that armor was unnecessary in the Po Valley, but it did demonstrate that mountain trained troops can learn to fight easily and efficiently in mountainous terrain, and that given proper leadership they are just as effective in the flatlands.

Proper equipment and training are the Damon and Pythias of mountain operations. Quantities of special clothing and equipment were issued to untrained units in Italy, but men still had trenchfoot, frosted fingers, and restless nights until special training in the use of special winter equipment was given by competent instructors. In winter and low mountain operations, special organizations are less important. Time and again the war proved that properly equipped specially trained standard units performed better and came through with fewer casualties from weather, terrain and the enemy than other standard units which, without the special equipment and training, were fighting beside them.

I believe that special organizations are desirable in truly Alpine operations, although we have no U. S. combat experience on which to base such a belief. Had the end of the war not come just when it did, warfare in the Italian Alps would have tested the division even more sternly, and proved what trained mountain troops can do in warfare in big mountains. However, as the 10th Division pushed north from Riva<sup>5</sup> and was about to enter upon a truly Alpine campaign, the war fortunately ended and many lives were saved.

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<sup>5</sup> Situated at the northwest corner of Lake Garda in northern Italy. Not to be confused with the Riva Ridge of Mt. Belvedere, which lies in the Apennines and south of the Po.