

Taken from “The Impact of the Tenth Mountain Division on the Development of a Modern Ski Industry in Colorado and Vermont: 1930-1965” by David M. Leach

One of the biggest influences on Colorado skiing history was the 10th Mountain Division. The 10th Mountain Division of World War II trained just 30 miles south of Vail at Camp Hale. Known as the “Ski Troops,” the toughened soldiers learned to survive at high altitudes in sub-zero weather. They traveled with 90 lb. packs on their backs; scaled sheer cliffs and skied across treacherous mountain passes. The 10th suffered heavy casualties in Europe, but became one of the most decorated divisions in World War II.

In the winter of 1940 while Mount Mansfield celebrated the opening of its first chairlift and Aspen attempted to revive an old mining town, the United States Army and a group of civilian skiers turned their minds to World War II. On a bitter cold, wind whipped night in February of 1940, Charles “Minnie” Dole, Bob Livermore, Alex Bright, and Roger Langley sat at Johnny Seasaw’s in Manchester Vermont enjoying a drink after a hard day of skiing. All four men pioneered the sport American downhill skiing during their lifetime. Livermore had raced in the 1936 Olympics, Langley presided as president of the National Ski Association, many considered Bright as the “dean of American downhill racing,” and Charles “Minnie” Dole had founded the National Ski Patrol (Burton 63). The conversation changed from recollecting the day spent on Bromley Mountain to the Soviet invasion of Finland.

Across the Atlantic Nazi Germany had marched through Poland and Hitler’s gaze focused on the rest of Europe, while in November of 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Finland. In what can only be described as a David vs. Goliath match, the Finns held out for three months before succumbing to the Soviet Army. Outmanned almost five to one, the Finnish Army managed to embarrass the Soviets with stealth raids on skis: quickly attacking the Soviet forces, then sinking back into the woodland (Shelton 8). Dressed in white camouflage, the Finnish troops used guerrilla warfare, and their knowledge of winter survival to repel the first and second offensives of the Soviet army, before “massive reinforcements from all over the Soviet Union were moved to the Finnish front” ending the conflict (Weinberg 105).

With Pearl Harbor a little less than two years away, many Americans believed firmly in the idea of isolationism. After the huge loss of American soldiers during World War I, most Americans refused to give up more young men to another war in Europe. However, looking at the growing power of Hitler’s Germany, Dole and the others present began to wonder about a possible attack on the United States in the future, particularly one from Canada and down into the Adirondacks of New York and the Green Mountains of Vermont. The concerns of Dole and others during this night were not as far fetched as they might seem. If Hitler managed to take control of England, he could have used Canada as a staging ground for a war on the United States. During the French and Indian War “British and French troops fought up and down the Champlain Valley.” Later in the American Revolution, British forces planned to march down the large valley between Vermont and New York, through the Hudson River Valley, and into New York City (Shelton 12). Regularly trained infantry troops would not be to succeed in the harsh terrain and unforgiving weather of America’s Northeast, especially if fighting against specially trained German mountain troops. Believing strongly in the call for American Mountain troops, Dole immediately wrote to United States War

Department, offering the help of the newly formed National Ski Patrol to aid in the creation and training of such a division (Shelton 13).

Around the same time Minnie Dole began his correspondence with Washington about the formation of a winter warfare group, the U.S. Army had already begun to think about preparing troops for fighting in cold weather and mountainous regions. The army ordered winter training for six divisions from Massachusetts to Washington. The purpose of this training served two purposes as stated by General Marshall in the winter of 1940:

“1) the establishment of an agency for test and development of clothing and materials for winter warfare operations, and 2) the procurement of skis and other equipment with which to begin ski instruction in certain divisions, initially for morale and recreational purposes.” (Burton 76)

The military employed the help of the National Ski Patrol to act as guides and provide winter survival tips, while civilian instructors taught skiing technique. Even ski instructors such as Brad and Janet Mead helped where they could. The owners of Pico Peak opened up their mountain to soldiers, and troops new to the sport, “tumbled down the slopes with hilarity and delight” (Besser 43). However, during 1940 and 1941 the U.S. Army did not intend to build up a specialized mountain warfare group. The army stated the main goal as, “to lay a foundation for future winter training” (Govan 5).

Two instances during winter training with the 3rd Division in Northern California and the 41st Division at Mount Rainer in Washington gave an early preview of the relationships that would exist in winter warfare groups for the rest of the war. With many other pressing issues, the army could not spend the time or the money to test or equip troops with the best winter gear, forcing knowledgeable troops to use their own previous experience. On a patrol by the 41st in the mountains of Washington, harsh weather conditions and poor equipment proved too much for nearly one third of the men who were sent back to camp. The army issued without skis edges so that the soldiers could hardly make a turn, while “Civilian-made boots and bindings, designed for packed-slope skiing, fell apart; soldiers collapsed from exhaustion or limped on blistered feet” (Burton 89). Early equipment tests proved how unprepared the U.S. army would be if they ever needed to fight in winter terrain.

In April of 1941, members of the 3rd Division set off with twenty other experienced skiers in the Sierra Nevadas. One of these skiers was David Brower, a pioneer in the mountaineering field, who after the war would go on to become the Executive Director of the Sierra Club. At the time, Brower had published the Sierra Club’s *Manual of Ski Mountaineering*. The guide consisted of different articles written by members of the Sierra Club “on everything from avalanche awareness to putting together a lightweight kit of backcountry essentials.” Brower’s company came a bit more prepared than the 41st Division. All of their equipment had come from civilian suppliers such as Bass Company, L.L. Bean, and Abercrombie and Fitch. They camped at 10,000 feet, and tested every type equipment they could carry from stoves to sunscreen to ski wax. All this information found its way to Washington (Shelton 23-24). Civilian groups like this greatly helped to prepare the military for equipping a specialized mountain warfare group.

At this point the threat of a possible invasion on U.S. soil still concerned both General Marshall and Minnie Dole. The National Ski Patrol called for its members to become

completely familiar with the local terrain in case of an invasion from Canada or either coast. In a letter to Dole, Marshall placed value in the Ski Patrol by stating that they should be “prepared to furnish guides to the army in (the) event of training or of actual operations in the local areas” (Burton 79). The perceived threat of foreign invasion soon died down, and the army turned its attention to the war abroad. General Marshall questioned whether the United States would need a specially trained mountain division to fight in Europe.

Several international factors contributed to the establishment of an actual Division that specialized in mountain and winter warfare. As the military switched their focus from domestic invasion to the war abroad, the army no longer needed guide service from the National Ski Patrol. A specialized force of mountain troops needed sufficient training in snow and cold climates, and as the Sierra Club’s *Manual of Ski Mountaineering* had written, it “is easier to train a skier to be a soldier than to train a soldier to be a skier” (Shelton 76). In addition, the widespread German military operations across Europe caused the military to consider “no theater for the employment of American troops as fantastic.” However, in 1941, no room in the military’s budget existed for extra expenditures; especially one that required the development of special equipment not used by the regular infantry (Training 4).

The push for the development of specialized mountain troops came from the success of the German Army in the Balkans; specially trained German Mountain Troops stationed elsewhere in Europe, as well as the failure of British troops in the mountain terrain of Norway. However, in August of 1941 Italian troops attempted to follow Hitler’s push east, and invaded Greece through the mountains of Albania. After a Greek counterattack the Italians were forced to retreat into the mountains which resulted in disaster. An estimated ten thousand troops froze to death; twenty five thousand were killed in combat, and thousands more taken prisoner. “The divisions were not organized, clothed, equipped, conditioned or trained for either winter or mountain fighting” (Training 6). This event prompted the military to reconsider the formation of a specialized mountain warfare division as a U.S. report on the Italian loss concluded: “An army which may have to fight anywhere in the world must have units especially organized, trained, and equipped for fighting in the mountains and in winter. Such units cannot be improvised hurriedly from line divisions. They require long periods of hardening and experience, for which there is no substitute for time.” (Shelton 25)

From the combination of winter training with civilians at home, the efforts of Minnie Dole, and Italy’s military blunder, emerged the development of winter and mountain training in three different regions with three different areas of focus. Winter and low-altitude mountain training occurred at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and Buena Vista, Virginia respectively and alpine training for special mountain troops began again at Fort Lewis in Washington (Contiguglia 2). On November 15, 1941 the 87th Infantry Mountain Regiment became activated at the base of Mount Rainer. With the later additions of the 85th and 86th regiments, these men represented the beginning of what would become the 10th Mountain Division.

It was a great day for Colorado when the 10th came marching home. Scores of ski troopers came back to the high mountains of Colorado to live. The veterans served in every aspect of the sport from mountain operations, to patrolling, teaching, coaching, and manufacturing equipment. There is scarcely a ski area in the state that did not

benefit from their expertise.

Their vision shaped new ski areas and their innovative improvements lured skiers from around the world to Colorado slopes. In a few years time they had laid the foundation for Colorado's multi-million dollar ski industry. Sadly, Camp Hale is gone now, but the memories of the camp and all of the dedicated people who trained there live on at the Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum.

Sources

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