



## **Mountain Troops Enter World War II and Italy**

While training at Camp Hale from 1941 to 1944, soldiers in the 10<sup>th</sup> pioneered critical winter warfare techniques and equipment. They also tested their limits during military maneuvers like the Trooper Traverse and the D-Series, in which they survived outdoors and practiced military formations and exercises for days or weeks on end. After so much time spent training, members of the 10<sup>th</sup> began to wonder if they would ever enter World War II.

Despite their unique and valuable wilderness skills, “there were reports written by the Army that were very critical, not only of the officer leadership of the 10<sup>th</sup> but particularly the fact that we didn’t have heavy enough weapons to stand up in combat against the German army,” according to John Imbrie, a 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division veteran and historian. No Army leader fighting over in Europe seemed to want these soldiers: “We trained and trained and trained and nobody wanted us.” (Bill Brown) In 1944, the men were sent to Camp Swift in Texas to train with heavy weaponry. The hot, dusty flatlands were the opposite of the terrain they had been training in, and were groomed for.

At last, an assignment emerged that seemed like an ideal match for the members of the 10<sup>th</sup>.

By the end of 1944, the Allies had suffered considerably during the last 16-month struggle in Italy. This long effort had left the rest of Italy in shambles, and the Germans were prepared with artillery batteries around the country.

No matter what the Allies attempted, the northernmost Apennine Mountains remained under German control, and the Allies were unable to break into the rest of Europe. The German Gothic line stretched from sea to sea, across the top of Italy’s boot, measuring 8 miles deep by 108 miles wide. From atop a series of high ridges, the Germans controlled all of the high ground, could see attacks coming and prepare defenses – and prevent the Allied 5<sup>th</sup> Army from moving into Germany from Italy.

This deadly mission to capture an impenetrable line of ridges in the Italian Apennines was awarded to the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division.

A crucial, narrow road winding around the base of these ridges was essential for the continuation of the 10<sup>th</sup>’s mission. In order to take this road and gain access into Germany and the rest of Europe, the 10<sup>th</sup> would need to overtake Mount Belvedere – but the key to Mount Belvedere was Riva Ridge. German observers perched on top of Riva Ridge would be able to alert soldiers on Mount Belvedere of any incoming attacks, and therefore the plan was doomed to fail without overthrowing Riva Ridge first.

Riva Ridge, 2,000 vertical feet of rock, was a sheer face towering over the American soldiers in the valley below. As Imbrie again recalls, “To my knowledge, no one ever tried to take Riva Ridge before and if you look at it in the wintertime, you can see why.”

By mid-January of 1945, the 14,000 men of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division had quietly and secretly moved into small villages surrounding these ridges in the northern Apennines area. There was a lot of work to be done in order to conquer the Germans located atop the ridges, and the 10<sup>th</sup> began planning possible routes up Riva Ridge.

Sources:

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“Fire on the Mountain,” First Run Features/Gage & Gage Productions, 1995.

“The Last Ridge,” Abbie Kealy, 2007.

Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum archives