

10th Battles for Riva Ridge

This article series focuses on history of the 10th Mountain Division, the famous “soldiers on skis” who fought in the Italian mountains during World War II. Throughout the winter, the series will be exploring the forces behind the creation of the 10th Mountain Division, why and how it was founded, their achievements during the war, and significant impacts the veterans had on the ski and wilderness industry after the war.

At the end of 1944, the Allies’ 16-month war struggle had left Italy in shambles, and the Germans were prepared with artillery batteries around the country. The Allies were unable to break the German Gothic line 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, prepare defenses and prevent the Allies from moving into the rest of Europe.

By mid-January of 1945, the 14,000 men of the 10th Mountain Division had quietly moved into small villages surrounding these ridges in the northern Apennines area, and began planning possible routes up Riva Ridge. This particular ridge held the German observatory post and was therefore crucial to defeating the rest of the Germans in the area and breaking their Gothic line.

The men assigned to the Riva Ridge operation found five routes up the 2,000-foot vertical cliff, the most difficult of which required ropes and pitons. Ironically, the specialized equipment that the 10th had developed and tested was back in the United States.

Vital to this operation was completing it at night, without artillery fire and as quickly as possible. As the sun set on February 18, 1945, 700 men congregated on Riva Ridge, while the rest of the division waited to take Mount Belvedere the next night.

As the soldiers worked their way up Riva Ridge, a fog set in, concealing their positions. What worried Dave Rankine, a veteran of the Riva Ridge operation, “was the fact that normally we have just one medic with us. And this time, we’ve got about five or six medics, and I thought, ‘They’re expecting a lot of us to get wounded and killed.’” Another 10th veteran, Howard Koch, recalls his anxiety that “we just went up in a single file, and therein lied the danger – that if we were discovered before we got up there, it could’ve been a very disastrous situation because we didn’t have room to deploy...”

When the men pushed up over the ridge and began their attack, “the Germans were back in dugouts sleeping and our troops took the guns over, turned them around and went down and threw hand grenades in their sleeping quarters and that’s the way they woke up,” Lt. General John Hay states. The Germans were awfully surprised at the American soldiers ascending from a side that had been declared “unclimbable.”

German counterattacks were to be anticipated, so Allied engineers designed a tramway system to evacuate wounded soldiers and transport supplies and ammunition to the troops. For five long days, the 10th held off counterattacks while the rest of the division prepared for the main attack on Mount Belvedere. Finally the critical observation post was in Allied hands and the battle continued for Mount Belvedere, Mount Gorgolesco and Mount Della Torraccia.

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