



10th Takes Mount Belvedere, Gorgolesco, della Terraccia German Gothic Line Broken

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.

Called into World War II in early 1945 to capture Italy’s northernmost Apennine Mountains from the German stronghold, the 10th Mountain Division succeeded where no other Allied soldiers had before.

As the sun set on February 18, 1945, the men of the 10th prepared to take Riva Ridge. This particular ridge held the German observatory post and was therefore crucial to defeating the German Gothic line across Italy. Holding off German counterattacks, Riva Ridge was finally in Allied hands and the battle continued for the rest of the surrounding ridges – Mount Belvedere, Mount Gorgolesco and Mount della Torraccia.

On the night of February 19, the main assault on Mount Belvedere began. Soldiers were assigned various objectives, but their overall goal was the same: take these mountains and hold them, no matter what. As they started up Belvedere, the attack orders were to carry bayonets and unloaded weapons, which made many men uneasy. As veteran Jim Barr recalls, “I didn’t like it and I don’t think many of the guys did. But the General knew that if we did fire them, the flash would give away our position, and we would be in worse shape than if we didn’t do it. For all practical purposes, we were soundless.”

The Germans, who had long occupied these ridges, were alerted of the 10th’s positions by minefields. Deadly artillery fire began to hit the division. “You fire at the enemy but you can’t see him because it’s black, you stumble over barbed wire, and all you know is that you tried to do the things that you’re supposed to do and the rest is chance,” said Bob Parker, another 10th veteran. Working his way up the mountain, Newc Eldredge “could hear voice that I knew – they were in those minefields! And then when the Germans started lobbing in all that mortar fire, the men began to run. You could recognize the screams – that was really unnerving.”

Under tremendous mortar fire and horrific minefield explosions, the men of the 10th struggled up Belvedere and to the hills beyond. Hugh Evans, fueled by anger of a friend’s

death, took on an entire field of Germans alone on Mount Gorgolesco and captured two machine-gun nests. For this incredible act of bravery, he was awarded the Silver Star Medal.

After four agonizing days of battle, the 10th controlled most of the Mount Belvedere area, but were still fighting, beyond, for Mount della Terraccia. Finally, on February 24, Lt. Col. John Hay's 86th Regiment, part of the 10th Mountain Division, captured that hill. "And the Germans wanted that back, they couldn't afford to let us keep it. So they counterattacked for a couple of days and we were low on ammunition, rations, everything else. ... I don't think there was a yard of ground that wasn't hit with a mortar or artillery shell, and I was afraid I'd lost most of my soldiers, from the intense fire. And then they attacked and we did a magnificent job and held the positions..." Hay said. The 10th's determination and resilience held off and furious German counterattacks.

At last, Germany's invincible ridgeline in Italy's northernmost Apennines had been shattered. As Hay acknowledges, "The assault on Belvedere, Riva Ridge and della Terraccia was a division effort. Every unit in the division participated."

The 10th broke the German Gothic line and did not stop moving forward. They continued into the Po Valley, headed north, and Hay recalls that Commanding General George Hays said, "I don't think they'll ever catch us."

Sources:

David Leach's 2005 senior thesis for Middlebury College, "The Impact of the Tenth Mountain Division on the Development of a Modern Ski Industry in Colorado and Vermont: 1930-1965."

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

"The Last Ridge," Abbie Kealy, 2007.

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