



The End of WWII: German Army Surrenders

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.

In early 1945, the 10th Mountain Division was called into World War II to regain Italy’s northernmost Apennine Mountains from the German stronghold. After capturing Riva Ridge, a German observatory post, on Feb. 19, 1945, the 10th seized the rest of the surrounding ridges: Mount Belvedere, Mount Gorgolesco, and Mount della Terraccia.

Germany’s invincible ridgeline in northern Italy had finally been shattered. After fending off German counterattacks, the stage was set for an Allied offensive to secure Italy and the rest of Europe. The 10th broke the German Gothic line and continued north into the Po Valley.

Surprising officers on both sides, the 10th persevered in the face of the fearsome German Army. In attempts to take key roads beyond the Apennines, the 10th struggled through relentless shelling, towns left in shambles and crucial bridges that were repeatedly destroyed. Many soldiers in the mountain troops were killed while fighting for small towns and villages, including Torger Tokle, a famous ski jumping champion. As 1st Class Ken McDonald wrote in a letter, “Almost every town in Italy has been destroyed, at least in part.”

Members of the 10th spread out and pushed forward through the complex and treacherous terrain of northern Italy during the next two months. Their triumphs came at a great cost. During the March offensive alone, the 10th suffered over one thousand casualties.

The shock and trauma of losing comrades and friends affected everyone in the 10th. Bob Parker says, “After my buddies were killed, I can remember helping to put their remains in bodybags... And after that, I remember nothing for five days... that’s the body and the mind’s way of protecting itself. That trauma is something you have to experience in order to understand what war does to young men.”

On April 14, during a vital mission to take out German observers on a hill, John McGrath captured several machine gun nests and was hit with a shell after securing the

hill. For this heroic act, he was awarded the 10th Mountain Division's only Congressional Medal of Honor.

Through their efforts, the 10th had opened a gap that the Germans couldn't secure. The 10th, leading the 5th Army towards the Po Valley and the rest of Europe, chased the Germans to the Po River. Under heavy shelling and opposition, the 10th crossed the river and the entire Po Valley in seven days. "We moved so fast across the Po Valley that they were too disorganized to know what to do next," said David Brower.

Thousands of German soldiers began to surrender. The 10th struggled to seal German escape routes around the mountainous area. After Hitler's suicide on April 30, the Allies knew it was only a matter of time.

On May 2, 1945, the world celebrated as the German Army unconditionally surrendered in Italy. By mid-July, the 10th was ordered to prepare for an invasion of Japan's mountains. However, after the Allies dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Japan surrendered, everything was changed.

Upon entering World War II, the soldiers of the 10th were able to tip the balance in the Allies favor – but not without sustaining one of the highest casualty rates of any division in the Army. Out of 14,300 men, 992 were killed and over 4,000 were wounded.

High praise for the 10th Mountain Division was well-deserved. General Mark Clark commended, "I look upon the action of the 10th Mountain as one of the most vital and brilliant in the campaign. Nothing, it seemed, could stop your drive. This is the aggressive spirit of which victory is made." As Lt. Gen. John Hay said, "We fought a war the way you should fight it. We came in late, fought like hell, did our job, and the enemy surrendered and we went home."

Without the heroic and crucial accomplishments of the 10th Mountain Division, the Allies would not have been able to break the German Gothic line in northern Italy and put an expedient end to World War II. Those who had survived in the 10th Mountain Division finally went home, for good, and started a life after the war.

Sources:

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"The Last Ridge," Abbie Kealy, 2007.

Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum archives