

Love of outdoors attracts 10th veterans

This article series focuses on history of the 10th Mountain Division, the famous “soldiers on skis” who fought in Italy’s 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.

Many 10th Mountain Division veterans joined the booming ski industry after the war, but love of the outdoors took others down divergent paths.

As a Lieutenant in the 10th, David Brower trained soldiers in mountaineering and cross-country skiing and was awarded a Bronze Star in action. While fighting in Italy, he saw firsthand the destruction of wild terrain. After the war, Brower edited the Sierra Club’s Bulletin, managed their trips, and became their first Executive Director in 1952. His experience of destruction in Italy showed him “how what had been wild country no longer was, and that was not exactly what we wanted to see in the United States and in development of our own mountains.”

Brower successfully campaigned against numerous development projects that would destroy natural land, including the Echo Park Dam in Utah, and helped to pass the Wilderness Act in 1964. Deeply concerned with overpopulation and overdevelopment, Brower is the founder of many environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club Foundation, Friends of the Earth, Earth Island Institute and John Muir Institute for Environmental Studies.

Even one of the world’s most successful athletic companies was founded by a 10th veteran. Bill Bowerman joined the Army as a 2nd Lieutenant but was transferred to the 86th Mountain Infantry at Camp Hale. He organized troops supplies and maintained the carrying mules. Promoted to Commander of the 86th Regiment’s 1st Battalion at rank of Major, Bowerman negotiated a stand-down of German forces just days before their surrender. His actions earned him four Bronze Star medals, a Good Conduct medal and a Silver Star.

As the head track & field coach at the University of Oregon in 1948, Bowerman led a wildly successful program. His team was undefeated in 10 seasons and he trained 31 Olympic athletes, 51 All-Americans and 24 NCAA Champions during his 24 years as coach.

In 1962, Bowerman was introduced to a new fitness routine in New Zealand: jogging. He wrote books and articles and ignited an American phenomenon. In 1964, with his former miler Phil Knight, they started an athletic footwear company. Bowerman was “looking for a shoe that did not pick up mud...and I was eating waffles...and there was the pattern.” Famously using a waffle iron to experiment with synthetic rubber, he invented the waffle shoe and “they went like hotcakes.” Their shoe company, known first as Blue Ribbon Sports, became Nike.

After Fritz Benedict graduated with a Master’s in landscape architecture and interned with Frank Lloyd Wright, he entered the 10th Mountain Division at Camp Hale. In 1945, Benedict joined other veterans at Aspen and designed the master plan for Vail in 1962, Snowmass in ’67, Breckenridge in ’71 and additions to Aspen and Steamboat.

Benedict served as chairman of Aspen’s first Planning & Zoning Commission and on Pitkin County’s Planning Commission, helping to create a pedestrian mall and sign code. In 1980, he founded the 10th Mountain Division Hut System, with 10 structures

linked by 30 miles of trail in mountains between Vail and Aspen and enjoyed by thousands annually. While Benedict was “working in Vail, I got the idea: ‘Gee, wouldn’t it be nice to have a trail between [Vail and Aspen].’” The inspiration for huts was his experience at Camp Hale, “the way skiing started. It was simple and a lot of camaraderie...and it’s getting back to the way skiing was when it started, and to preserve that is so important.”

Sources:

- “Fire on the Mountain,” First Run Features/Gage & Gage Productions, 1995.
- Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum archives