This article focuses on Fred Beckey service in the 10th Mountain Division of the US Army and the mystery behind his honorable discharge in late 1944 or early 1945, before World War II ended.

A quick side note, this unit went by different names from its founding. In November 1941 the 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment was activated, then the Mountain Training Center was created in September 1942, followed by the 10th Light Division (Alpine) in July 1943. It became the 10th Mountain Division officially in early November 1944. For simplicity sake, I refer to this unit as the 10th Mountain Division throughout this article.

This subject caught my attention after observing Fred Beckey’s coy reaction to the question about his discharge from the Army before the end of World War II, in the film *Dirtbag: The Legend of Fred Beckey*. Plus seeing the numerous climbs Beckey made in 1945, before VE and VJ days, heightened my curiosity.

After researching various books, papers and websites about the history of the 10th Mountain Division in World War II, I’ve come up with a theory about Beckey’s discharge. The following information also explains why Fred Beckey did not enter military service until 1943, so he was able to continue to climb in 1942 and thus have the opportunity to make the second ascent of Mt Waddington with his brother Helmy.

But first I’ll start with some general background information and history. Pardon my use of a lot of military jargon in the following paragraphs, it helps support my theory.

**Recruitment and Induction into the 10th Mountain Division**

Prior to the United States becoming formally involved in World War II, Congress passed, and President Roosevelt signed the *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940*, on September 16, 1940. This act required that men between 21- and 36-years old to register with local draft boards. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the *Selective Training and Service Act* was amended to make all men between the ages of 20 and 44 liable for military service and required all men between the ages of 18 and 64 to register.

Meanwhile the National Ski Patrol (NSP) was putting out the word to skiers, mountaineers and outdoorsman, that the 10th Mountain Division needed their skills. The NSP had put out notices in newspapers across the nation, in late 1941 and early 1942. However, the Army suspended recruitment on July 8, 1942.

Fred Beckey graduated from high school in June 1941 and enrolled in the University of Washington for the 1941-1942 term, at age 18. On August 24, 1942, just days after returning home from climbing Mt Waddington, he registered for the draft, but was still not liable for military service.

However, another amendment to *Selective Training and Service Act* was signed on November 13, 1942, which called the 18 and 19-year old men into military service.

In coordination with the National Ski Patrol, the Army resumed selection in early December 1942 for men with the right ski, mountaineering and outdoor skills. Below is an article from a newspaper in Park City, Utah during this timeframe.

A close up of a newspaper

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*The Park Record*, December 10, 1942, 5.

Fred Beckey could wait to be drafted, but in doing so he risked being assigned to any military service and duty. But he enlisted on December 12, 1942, which gave him the choice to apply for the 10th Mountain Division. Beckey filled out the questionnaire for the 10th Mountain Division and got the necessary three recommendations, then submitted the paper work. Needless to say, Beckey had the required specialized skills. Beckey was given a few weeks to get his private life in order, then reported for induction in early 1943.

Over the course of the war, the NSP processed over 12,000 applications for men wishing to serve in units that became the 10th Mountain Division. But not all applicants were accepted. However, the 10th Mountain Division was so eager for qualified men, that sometimes a man was accepted and inducted into the Army in ten days.

Furthermore in 1943 the War Department gave the NSP the unprecedented authority to recruit qualified men, and to assign those men directly to the 10th Mountain Division. This increased authority enabled the NSP to recruit and assign men to the ranks of the 85th and 86th Regiments of the 10th Mountain Division.

So off to Camp Hale, Colorado went Beckey in early 1943. As part of the induction process each person is subjected to interviews and completion of numerous forms to determine how their background, schooling or previous work skills fits best for the Army. Initially Beckey was assigned to be trained as a medic in the 85th Regiment, probably based on his father being a physician.

**Training Problems at Camp Hale**

A key part of how an Army trains and prepares for war is through creation and use of doctrine. Doctrine is the structure and baseline for how an army executes its mission. When the 10th Mountain Division was created in 1940, it did not have a doctrine for mountain operations, let alone field manuals to train personnel. As a result, the Army had to rely on civilians skilled in skiing, mountaineering and outdoor activities (provided by recruitment efforts of the NSP) to help come up with the doctrine and field manuals for mountain warfare. However only about 20% of the men in the 10th Mountain Division had outdoor, mountaineering or ski skills.

Not surprisingly most volunteers accepted by the NSP arrived at Camp Hale with no Army basic training. Basic infantry school was 8 weeks, then another couple of months of training in specialized skills so that when it was all said and done it took about four months for the Army to train a raw recruit.

The Mountain Training Center (MTC), (later to become the Mountain Training Group), had been activated in September 1942 to develop procedures and manuals and to conduct training in mountain warfare. The MTC had around 300 instructors and amongst its ranks were about 100 experienced ski and mountaineering instructors picked from the 87th Regiment. But most of these ski and rock-climbing instructors held the rank of private.

On January 2, 1943 the Commanding Officer of the 10th Mountain Division issued a directive that soldiers at Camp Hale begin 40 half-days of ski instruction by the MTC instructors. The directive also included officers and soon led to a situation in which no one seemed to know who was in charge. Officers refused to obey orders of their instructors from the MTC because they happened to be of lesser rank. Some officers even boycotted these sessions. With a lack of discipline, the instructors were frustrated when many enlisted men refused to follow orders. There was also the issue of a high absentee rate by the enlisted men for ski instruction.

After an exercise in February 1943 turned into a debacle, the Commanding Officer of the 10th Mountain Division appointed an officer as director of the ski school in the MTC, but more importantly gave him the authority to enforce orders.

The Army again attempted to address the training and morale problems in April 1943 with the creation of a special training unit within the MTC. The existing 10th Recon Unit’s mission was re-defined from reconnaissance to providing instructors for training and the unit was attached to the MTC.

But there was still a lack of men who possessed both rock-climbing and glacier skills in the 10th Mountain Division. At one point in the spring of 1943, there were no more than twenty men in the 10th Mountain Division, who could qualify as instructors in these two skills **[1] .**

I reckon Fred Beckey fulfilled the criteria on both counts.

This tiny nucleus of twenty men was the cadre, as it were, the instructors of another slightly larger group of instructors who in turn could be expanded as a true instruction staff, under the direct supervision of these few experts. These elite men were training the trainers.

Also, other personnel with skiing and mountaineering skills were vetted and selected from the regiments of the 10th Mountain Division and transferred into the 10th Recon Unit, which now increased in total from 100 to about 150 instructors.

It was in this timeframe that Fred Beckey was handpicked from the 85th Regiment and assigned to the 10th Recon Unit. Now he spent most of his time training other men in special skills, rather than receiving the basic training required of all personnel, including medics.

About this time the Army came up with the method to easily identify the instructors, by having them wear either white tape or a white arm band on their jacket to show their skill and experience **[2].**

A group of people standing in the snow

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Fred Beckey standing at the far right at Copper Hill ski area, with fellow instructors, in late 1943.

Check out the white spats (gaiters). Looking sharp!

Photo by: unknown. Denver Public Library, Western History Collections, Digital Collections, 10th Mountain Division Records, Call number: TMD351-2017-1974.

The Army in Washington DC did not recognize the fact that these men skilled in mountaineering and skiing were entitled to a technician’s rating or promotion to sergeant or higher**.[2]** In this topsy-turvy world, recently inducted expert civilians were now training officers and sergeants, along with other enlisted men in rock climbing and skiing. Training in skiing took place at Cooper Hill, south of Camp Hale near Tennessee Pass and at two other ski hills near Camp Hale. While teaching of rock climbing occurred on cliffs near Camp Hale and several miles north at Homestake Creek Cliffs.

This next piece of information is key to my theory.

In July 1943 an evaluation of the instructors in the MTC was completed and it was determined that about 100 of these officers and men were deemed unsuited for tactical combat, due to lack of basic training in combat skills or because of physical handicaps **[3].** Basic military training for the instructors of the MTC had practically ceased. For the Commander of the 10th Mountain Division, and for the US Army, it was a higher priority that this pool of specialist skilled in skiing and mountaineering, be on call at any time, to train other Army personnel at any place in the nation.

As an example of this, on July 21, 1943, some 20 plus rock-climbing instructors from 10th Recon Unit were assigned to Elkins, West Virginia to establish a base for training Army personnel in rock climbing. Captain Duke Watson was in charge of these instructors. David Brower, later to become a prominent leader of the Sierra Club, helped organize this base at Seneca Rocks. Beckey was not among these instructors initially.

**Exercises and War Games at Camp Hale and the Deployment of 10th Mountain Division to Italy**

Meanwhile the Commander of the 10th Division came up with exercises, maneuvers and war games to test the readiness of the units. Below is a photo of Beckey, on the left, taking part in a war games near Cooper Hill during the winter of 1943-44. He wore a red armband, to indicate which team he was on during the war game.

A group of people standing on a snow covered slope

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Photo by: unknown. Denver Public Library, Western History Collections, Digital Collections, 10th Mountain Division Records, Call number: TMD351-749.

Beckey also participated in an exercise that become known as the Trooper Traverse, which went from near Leadville to Aspen. This ski traverse took place between February 21-24, 1944 and included Fred Beckey and 32 other ski instructors from the 10th Recon Unit. Nine of these instructors were originally from the 85th Regiment (including Beckey), six instructors were originally from the 86th Regiment and nine instructors were originally from the 87th Regiment.

On March 21, 1944 the instructors from the 10th Recon Unit, consisting of seven officers and 142 enlisted men, were either dispersed to line companies in the 10th Mountain Division or re-assigned to other duty. In Beckey’s case, he was assigned to Elkins, West Virginia and was one of over 50 instructors to train Army personnel in rock climbing. This lasted until July 1, 1944 when Seneca Rocks training area was officially shut down.

Meanwhile the rest of the 10th Mountain Division had relocated to Camp Swift, near Austin, Texas by June 24, 1944. The relocation to Texas happened because the Army had not decided where to deploy the 10th Mountain Division yet and one possibility was in the rugged country of Burma. After the closure of Seneca Rocks, Beckey was re-assigned back to the 10th Mountain Division in Texas.

He certainly wasn’t in high demand to teach skiing or rock climbing at Camp Swift. He must have had some down time, because he wrote a climbing article in September 1944, which appeared in the December 1944 issue of *Appalachia Journal*. The eleven-page article with includes 3 photographs, was titled “New Summits in the Picket Range”. It chronicles the climbing achievements during two trips into the remote range in 1941 with his brother Helmy.

During this timeframe the *Draft Classifications of Selective Training and Service Act* was revised again. Beginning on October 5, 1944 personnel could be classified as 1-C, and could be discharged honorable from the armed forces. This classification was created for the purpose of demobilizing men from military service.

**Theory on Beckey’s Discharge from Army**

Becky’s unique skills, incomplete basic training and timing of military events around the world resulted in him not being deployed overseas in 1945.

The refrain heard from some of the US military commanders, along with the media and public in late summer of 1944, was that the war in Europe would be over by Christmas. By November 1944 this was obviously not going to occur. United States and its allies were making steady progress against Nazi Germany and there was confidence that the Wehrmacht was on its last legs, but much hard fighting awaited in the new year.

In the central Pacific during the summer of 1944, US Naval power had crushed the Japanese carrier fleet in the Battle of the Philippine Sea and Marines had won victories on the Japanese held islands of Guam, Tinian and Saipan with high causalities. With the capture of the last island, B-29s could now bomb the Japanese homeland. In late October 1944 US Army forces landed on Leyte Island of the Philippines and shortly thereafter the US Navy won the largest Naval fleet engagement in history against the Japanese fleet in the Battle of Leyte Gulf. So steady progress was being made in this military theatre.

By November 1944 the Army had decided to deploy the 10th Mountain Division to Italy. First, the division traveled by train to a port in Virginia. On December 11, 1944 the 86th Regiment departed for Italy, arriving on the 22nd . The 85th and 87th Regiments embarked for Naples, Italy on January 4, 1945, arriving on the 13th.

But for Fred Beckey, along with about 100 personnel from the MTC, they were classified as unsuited for tactical combat. Because they were so busy training Army personnel in rock climbing and skiing, they never received the necessary basic combat training. These instructors were not dispersed to the regiments in the 10th Mountain Division in November and not deployed to Italy shortly thereafter.

The Army thanked Beckey for his valuable services rendered and he received an honorable discharge, rather than have him complete basic training.

He returned home and climbed Mt. St Helens two days prior to VE Day, May 8, 1945. He would climb 13 other peaks in Washington State that year, including South, Middle and North Peaks of Mt Hagen, two days after VJ day, August 14, 1945.

**Endnotes**

**[1]** Jay, John C. *History of Mountain Training Center, Study No. 24.* Fort Knox, Kentucky. The US Army Armor School Library. 1948. 58.

**[2]** Jay, John C. *History of Mountain Training Center, Study No. 24.* Fort Knox, Kentucky. The US Army Armor School Library. 1948. 62

**[3]** Jay, John C. *History of Mountain Training Center, Study No. 24.* Fort Knox, Kentucky. The US Army Armor School Library. 1948. 112.

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