The Tenth Mountain Infantry Division
(aka The Mountain Troops, the Ski Troops, and Minnie's Boys)
Richard Bradley November 14, 2022

(10th Mountain Division)

The tale of the Mountain Troops is an interesting chapter in the history of Colorado and of the second World War.

Never had the U.S. Army had such an outfit. It was unique in that it grew out of a sport and was held together by that sport.

It was unique in its makeup. 60% of the Mountain Troops were college graduates. (As compared to 35% for an average Division). Many were already successful business executives. One of them, the grandson of W. H. Danforth, was heir to a fortune. Their members included a future U.S. Senator and Presidential candidate (Bob Dole), a future governor of Massachusetts, and several future creators and managers of Colorado ski areas – Aspen, Vail, Steamboat Springs, Loveland Pass and more. About 20% of them were foreign born, refugees from Fascist Europe. Among these were a national ski jumping champion (Torger Tokle), a former Swiss national downhill champion (Walter Prager), a former Austrian national slalom champion, and a cadre of ski instructors from Sun Valley, Idaho, America's preeminent ski area at that time. (No wonder that a German intelligence report would later refer to them as a "bunch of influential sports types.") The remaining 40% of the Division's 14,000 men were mule skinners, lumberjacks, prospectors, and cowboys – that is, people accustomed to rugged outdoor living – plus, of course, some just plain G. I. Joes who happened to wind up in this Division.

The general I.Q. of the outfit was such that two thirds of them were eligible for Officers Candidate School, although most of them declined to apply for fear of becoming separated from the Division, as happened to one of my brothers. In an average Army division at that time perhaps 30% would be eligible.

The regular Army was not a little distrustful of this group of "influential sports types," and threw up its hands in exasperation when older-brother lieutenants called younger brother privates by their first names, and vice versa, while out on maneuvers. Many wondered whether such an elitist outfit would ever be

effective in battle. In fact, the mountain troops were superb soldiers when their time came. Field Marshall Harold Alexander and General Mark Clark, under whom they fought in northern Italy, declared the 10th was the finest division they had ever known, and their opposite number on the German side, General von Senger, whom the 10th helped defeat, agreed. The high casualty rate – 35% killed or wounded in 3 months of intense fighting – indicated that this assortment of preppies, yodelers, and roughnecks were no shirkers.

How did the 10th come into existence? It's often hard to assign an absolute beginning to anything, but one event that had a lot to do with its creation occurred on November 30, 1939: Russia invaded Finland. It was becoming a pattern. Hitler had recently invaded Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland; before that Japan had gone into China, and Italy into Ethiopia. In the United States, which was then isolationist and no military power at all, it was easy to become paranoid. Might we not be on somebody's bucket list?

But what was really special about the Russian invasion of Finland was that all during the winter of 1939-40 the greatly outnumbered Finns gave the Russians a terrible shellacking. Moving quickly and quietly through dark dense forests on lightweight skis, and camouflaged by white uniforms, the Finns picked off the Russians unmercifully as the latter marched along forest roads or huddled around campfires at night. Indeed, the Russians thought they were up against a much larger force than was actually the case. The enemy seemed to be everywhere.

Among the people who paid attention to this phenomenon was a New York City insurance salesman named Minnie Dole. (His real name was Minot, but in 1918 an Army sergeant dubbed new-recruit Dole "Minnie" because he didn't shave and didn't need to. The name stuck with him for life. It even got him into hot water once when he sent a telegram to an acquaintance, a married man, asking him to meet him in such-and-such hotel at 10 PM and signing the telegram "Minnie.") Dole, who was soon to become the father of the ski troops, had only two years earlier become the father of the National Ski Patrol – a network of volunteers who, in exchange for certain privileges at ski areas, stand ready to administer first aid to the injured, haul them down the mountains on toboggans

if need be, and generally do anything reasonable to try to make ski areas safer. He got into this business through some misfortunes of his own.

We need to go back and fill in just a little. From prehistoric times until the late 1800's skiing was mainly just a mode of transportation in northern climes. By 1900 a few Scandinavians were entertaining themselves and spectators by jumping long distances off of natural or manmade bumps, and Scandinavian emigrants were exporting their skill and exuberance to places like Austria and the northern United States. Skiing didn't start to become a major participant sport, however, until Austrian Hannes Schneider of St. Anton developed an easier method of skiing down hills than the Norwegians were using, and entrepreneurs began building ~~effortless~~ contraptions for getting people back to the top again – rope tows, initially, then T-Bars, and eventually chair lifts and gondolas. By the mid-1930's the bug was just beginning to bite Americans who lived in or near snow country, and among those bitten was Minnie Dole, then in his mid thirties and already an enthusiastic mountain climber. But in those days the main appeal of skiing, like mountain climbing, was that it was difficult, dangerous, and uncomfortable. You expected to take risks, but you counted on your own skill to stay out of trouble. Within a short time a great deal of trouble befell Minnie. First, he broke an ankle skiing down a logging road in upstate Vermont. He was only a quarter mile from the main road, but he lay in the snow for hours before his wife was able to find anyone who would help. In the end a couple of farm lads dragged him to the road on a piece of sheet metal roofing material – and then he had to endure a long uncomfortable trip back to New York because the local doctor said the break was too severe for him to treat. Following this, in quick succession, his wife wrecked her knee skiing on a local golf course, and his best friend, participating in a downhill race sponsored by the newly formed Amateur Ski Club of New York, ran into a tree and was killed.

A man of lesser determination simply would have kicked the habit, but not Dole. Instead, he organized a ski patrol system, first locally at Stowe, Vermont, to cover a major downhill championship race, and then nationally, with regional and local leaders, everywhere that people skied. (In the 1960's, two CC faculty members were members of the NSP – Roger Whitney and Mike Novac.)

And so Dole, in the winter of 1939-40, two years before Pearl Harbor, contemplated the events in Europe and realized, as the British had realized in 1779, that a natural invasion route to North America and the United States would be up the St. Lawrence River and then down the Champlain Valley to Albany and New York City, thus cutting off all the Northeast. To counter such an invasion, Dole decided, we would need a bunch of fleet-footed skiers, clothed in white, familiar with the Adirondack and Green Mountains, who could flit through the forests, attacking the enemy -- as the Finns ~~were now~~ had been doing in Europe. And with this in mind he offered the services of his National Ski Patrol to the War Department. He received just enough encouragement from some quarters to more than compensate for the official brushoffs he got from others, and being a man of action and determination, as we have seen, he left no string unpulled until he wound up in the office of – General George Marshall himself! (That's what a good liberal arts education can do for one.) Marshall was impressed, both by the force of Minnie's arguments, and by Minnie himself, and a few weeks later Minnie got the first of what would become many green lights from General Marshall.

The initial concept was quite modest: members of the National Ski Patrol, acting as civilian experts, would serve as consultants in the development of equipment for winter warfare, and would also train the GI's how to get around on skis.

But as 1940 became 1941 and the German advance was slowed in eastern Europe and Russia, this concept changed. Invasion of America now seemed less imminent and less likely. More likely seemed the possibility that at some point we might have to send troops abroad, perhaps into mountainous country like Norway. What was now needed, Marshall decided, was an Army unit of regimental strength, trained in mountain and winter warfare. And since experience to date indicated it might be easier to train skiers to shoot than to train shooters to ski, Marshall gave Dole a major role in recruiting people for this new regiment (later to become a full division). Dole sent out thousands of letters to people he knew, or knew about, who skied and/or climbed mountains, inviting them to apply for membership in this new outfit. If they were already serving in the Army, he invited them to apply for a transfer. Announcements went out to every college and university in the country having a skiing or outing program.

They went to every mountain club and explorers' club as well. Advertisements appeared in national publications like Colliers and Saturday Evening Post.

Minnie asked every applicant to send him a brief biography and three letters of recommendation, and then with very little staff he screened them all, reading letters of recommendations from brothers for brothers, parents for sons, wives for husbands, along with all the others, and passed on his own recommendations to the Army to fold into the recruitment (or transfer) process. There were foul-ups, of course; local citizen Bill Boddington went through the process, was accepted into the Mountain Troops, and then was sent to something entirely different. When the number of such foulups became oppressive, Minnie again took advantage of his liberal arts education: he took a certain general's secretary out to lunch, threw in a couple of martinis, and presto, somehow in a way that has embarrassed the Army ever since, Minnie received authorization not only to recruit and screen the ski troopers, but also to write out and send induction orders as well, a totally unprecedented procedure! And of course it worked.

The very first inductee, one Charles McLane, an accomplished skier fresh from Dartmouth College and a future stalwart of the Ski Troops' Glee Club, reported for duty at Fort Lewis in Tacoma, Washington, with his skis over his shoulder, his rucksack on his back, and his orders in his hand. The duty officer had never heard of the 87th Mountain Regiment, but decided McLane must be it, and gave him some olive drab trappings and assigned him a bunk. Very soon other folk began to appear, many of them old friends and acquaintances. (In what other Army unit would this happen?) In due time they got a regimental commander, a career cavalry officer who, of course, had never been on skis in his life.

This was just before Pearl Harbor.

After Pearl Harbor, Fort Lewis became a difficult place for holding maneuvers because people were halfway expecting a Japanese submarine attack on Tacoma. So the troops were given permission to take over Paradise Lodge, high on Mount Ranier, and went there for their first winter maneuvers.

But these were just temporary quarters. What was needed was a permanent location for training the troops, a place in mountainous country near a railroad, with ready access to water and electricity. First choice was a site near Yellowstone National Park, but endangered birds nested nearby and for once the National Audubon Society prevailed over the Uniter States Army. The site eventually chosen was Pando, Colorado, a whistlestop on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad line, between Leadville and Minturn, located in a broad valley at 9000 feet elevation, and ringed by high mountains. Construction began as soon as the snow melted, and in the fall of 1942, the Mountain Troops moved to their permanent quarters: Camp Hale, Colorado. Eventually, two more regiments were added, the 86th and the 85th, and the 10th Light Infantry Division was formed. The size of the outfit was now about 12,000 men.

By this time the 10th was getting a lot of GI's who <u>were not</u> Minnie's boys – flatlanders from warmer climes, and for these folk Camp Hale was anything other than an earthly paradise. It was cold. Leadville, the nearest town, was declared off-limits. The nearest big city, Denver, was hours away. What was anyone to do at Camp Hale when off duty except play poker and breathe the coal smoke that settled in the valley – a pall due in part to the camp's coal stoves and in part to the steam engines that passed every few hours. To the unwilling, Camp Hale became known as Camp Hell, and the very real pulmonary disorders that everyone developed was called the Pando Hack.

During winter maneuvers in 1943, things went from bad to worse. On one occasion, a bunch of new GI's, non-skiers fresh from sea level, were given one day to become acclimatized to the altitude and learn to ski, and were then sent into the mountains with heavy packs to camp in the snow and carry out maneuvers – all this in subzero weather. 230 people wound up in the hospital, invalided by exhaustion or frostbite or injury. Rumor had it that some of them got frostbite on purpose so that they could be shipped out of this insane outfit. In another instance, a company commander would have had his troops cross a steep avalanche slope if knowledgeable underlings hadn't succeeded in convincing him to take a different route. Minnie Dole, an observer at these maneuvers, was

furious and wrote a scathing letter to General Marshall, indicating that the top brass were rank-happy West Pointers with no mountain savvy, and all the brains were at the bottom. When Dole spoke, Marshall listened and heads rolled. Indeed it is said of Dole that in the course of the war he was effective in getting two generals relieved of their command – not bad considering that Truman and Eisenhower each got only one.

In the summer of 1943 the 10th saw its first action. The 87th Regiment participated in the invasion of Kiska in the Aleutians. 40,000 men and 100 ships, including 5 battleships, were sent to rout out the 10,000 Japanese that supposedly were occupying this fog-bound storm scoured stepping stone to mainland Alaska. In the fog, trigger-happy GI's killed and wounded one another, but there were no Japanese. They had pulled out of this worthless outpost two weeks earlier, by submarine. Shamefacedly, the Army returned the 87th to Hale.

Another winter came and went, the third for many of the men. Those hard core who had stuck it out at Hale were now in superb physical shape (except for their hack) and wondered why they were being given no role to play in the war effort. In a moment of cynicism the glee club wrote a song whose chorus went:

> Ho hum, I'm not so dumb:
> The Mountain Troops for me.
> Other guys can fight this war
> But I would rather ski.

Dole, too, expressed impatience – to General Marshall of course. What Dole and his boys did not then know was that their services <u>had been</u> offered to both McArthur and Eisenhower, and both had declined the offer. The 10th was a "light division" and neither of them wanted a light division. Perhaps, secretly, they were also wary of taking on a division of "influential sports types."

In the summer of 1944 the entire division turned in its skis and mountain equipment and moved to steamy hot Camp Swift, Texas. Morale hit rock bottom. Dole received scathing letters from his boys, blaming him for two years of wasted effort. Clearly, the Division was about to be split up and sent to various fronts as replacements.

But that was not to be. The Allied Army in Italy, which had captured Rome the day before the Normandy Beach invasion, and thus had enjoyed but a single day of newspaper headlines, was now bogged down trying to move north through the Apennine Mountains to the rich Po Valley beyond, and from there to Germany. There were only two major highways traversing this rugged range, and the Germans held all the high ground, with orders from "der Fuehrer" to hold fast at all costs. This was the famed Gothic Line, stretching 120 miles across Italy, along which 20 Allied Divisions faced 23 German Divisions, with neither side having the superiority in strength to attack and prevail. When General Mark Clark was asked if he wanted the 10th Mountain Division, he said he would take any help he could get. It was perhaps the best decision of his career.

So in September (1944) the 10th got a new commander – General George Hays, fresh from the front lines in Europe. Hays was a gaunt, aggressive, audacious commander in the George Patton mold, a winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War I for having successfully maintained signal communications during the Battle of the Marne, despite having 7 horses shot out from underneath him in a single day. He and the 10th hit it off at once. Colorado Springs resident Bill Boddington described the first time Hays addressed the 10th. "I understand you're a little different," he said. "Well, we're going to do something a little different. There will be some tough times, but there will also be some good times."

How had he known they were "a little different"? On his way to Camp Swift he had talked with both General Marshall and Minnie Dole. When he asked Minnie if there were any prima donnas in the outfit, Dole replied: "They're all prima donnas. That's what makes them potentially great."

Hays had the word "Mountain" added to their "Infantry" patch, a little touch to improve morale, and then put them through a series of maneuvers to make them combat-ready. This was the first time in three years the 10th had operated as a single unit. By Christmas, 1944, they were on the high seas, bound for Italy.

Shortly before they embarked, Minnie learned that Hays had considerably lightened the mountain packs his boys were carrying. Important survival gear had been jettisoned. When Minnie protested to General Marshall, he received a friendly but firm reply from General Hays, saying: "I am in charge and shall brook no interference whatsoever." Dole had finally been relieved of his command by a general.

Hays flew to Italy and had an early meeting with United States General Lucian Truscott, his immediate superior. "Do you think your Division can take Mt. Belvedere?" Truscott asked. Mt. Belvedere overlooks one of the two major highways through the Apennine Mountains, and the Germans had it heavily fortified. Hays looked at photographs of the broad, open, heavily mined slopes leading to the summit, and replied: "Possibly, but I don't think I'll have a Division anymore when I get there." Later, looking over maps, Hays discovered that any possible attack routes up Belvedere would be under direct fire from German positions on Riva Ridge, a three mile long headland just to the southwest of Belvedere and considerably higher. Clearly, to take Belvedere he would first have to take Riva. But ancient glaciers had sheared off the east side of Riva – the American side – leaving a steep 1500 foot face. The west side, the German side, was gentle with good roads all the way to the summit. "Find me a route up that face," Hays told one of his regimental commanders, and when the commander later returned with the report that there was no route, Hays chided him. "Nonsense," he said. "These are supposed to be mountain men. You and I might not be able to climb it, but surely they can." Colonel Tomlinson studied the face some more through his field glasses, and consulted with his mountain men. Returning to Hays, Tomlinson allowed that there were perhaps four possible routes.

Hays' plan was to climb the face at night under cover of darkness. Surprise was to be the crucial weapon, because, as he pointed out, a few people armed with nothing more than a handful of rocks could have repulsed any daytime attack up that face. Truscott was dubious and showed Hays an army directive, indicating that night attacks in the mountains had proven to be risky business and advising against it. Hays was all the more convinced: "The Germans have undoubtedly seen this and won't be expecting us."

So, on the evening of February 18, 1945, under cover of darkness, an 800 man assault team moved into barns and farmhouses near the base of Riva Ridge, and the following evening, again under cover of darkness, they started up the 4 routes with orders to be on top and in control by daybreak. From this distance I can only guess how difficult it must have been for the 800 men to climb a 1500 foot mountain face, quietly, in the dark, with heavy packs, over routes they had never tested before, routes which required ropes and perhaps pitons here and there – all the time knowing that one alert guard dog on top or a radio signal from a partisan in the valley would blow their cover. No air attack and no artillery fire had softened up the enemy positions in advance. That might have alerted them that something was up.

The mission, now legendary, was completely successful; the surprise total. A little after midnight all parties but one were on top and in control. There had been almost no American casualties. Field Marshall Alexander declared they had accomplished the impossible. A German officer, now a prisoner, admitted: "I never knew you Americans could climb anything quite that awkward."

There were counter attacks, of course, but characteristically Hays never let the enemy recover. The very next night, again under cover of darkness, his other two regiments started up Mt. Belvedere. In this case the fighting was intense, and at the height of the battle someone was heard to mutter: "I wish that bastard Minnie Dole was here now." Within a few days they had taken control of Belvedere and the surrounding high ground.

It would have been nice if the war could have ended here – as when General Wolff scaled the walls of Quebec. But for the 10th, this was just the beginning. The Po Valley was still many miles away.

Hays, sensing that the enemy had been taken off guard, was all set to press his advantage and move right on. Unfortunately, it was not only the Germans who had been taken off guard: the Allied armies had evidently expected a long struggle to take Mt. Belvedere, and were totally unprepared to follow up. Much to his annoyance, Hays was told to hold fast. He had outrun his support. In his memoirs, he hazards the guess that the casualties the 10th suffered later were greater because the enemy had been given a chance to regroup.

While holding fast, Hays let as many of his troops take leave for R. and R. as he felt he could afford, on a rotating basis. Here again the 10th proved itself to be different: instead of heading for the bars and night spots, many of them visited cathedrals, museums, and art galleries. As for Hays, he did something equally unprecedented: he visited every single one of his wounded soldiers in the base hospitals. "It takes it out of you," he commented, "but they deserve it. When you're lying there all shot up, no one less than the Old Man will do."

In due time the allied offensive got under way – but now with a new strategy. Originally, the capture of Belvedere was supposed to be merely a diversion; while the enemy was occupied there, the main force would surge forward along the other of the two major highways. But now the high command gave to the 10th the task of spearheading the drive north to the Po Valley. And once again Hay's and Minnie's boys outstripped their support. For most soldiers, mountainous terrain is formidable, fearsome, the enemy itself; but for the men of the 10th, mountains provided cover, opportunities – they were the friends. And the 10th moved quickly through them.

Hays threw overboard every rule in the book, but he seemed to have an unerring sense that he had the enemy on the run, and he was determined not to give them another chance to regroup. At one point his division was strung out as much as 50 miles, and was totally unsupported by the rest of the Fifth Army. His

troops crossed the Po River in canvas attack boats the same day the Germans . were swimming across it, and then rushed on toward the Alps. When they reached Lake Garda at the foot of the Alps, German demolition crews had already blown up some of the tunnels on the road around the lake leading up to Brenner Pass, so Hays and his troops used amphibious craft to get past the tunnels. They even commandeered a two-masted schooner, loaded it with artillery, and sailed it up the lake – a crazy throwback to an earlier era.

By this time the enemy was in full retreat everywhere in Europe, and VE Day came just before the 10th reached the top of the Pass. Indeed, George Patton got there first from the other side.

The 10th Mountain Division had been the last to arrive in Italy, and was the first to leave, undoubtedly bound for the coast of Japan. The men were on leave in the United States when the atomic bomb brought an end to the war.

The Division had the highest decoration rate of any in Italy, and, as a corollary, it also had the highest casualty rate. Among the many wonderful people – influential sports types or not – who did not return were Torger Tokle, the Norwegian-born national ski jumping champion and Ralph Bromaghin, the Austrian born Sun Valley Ski Instructor who had led the 10th in song back at Camp Hale, plus nearly a thousand others. "For us they will always be a source of inspiration," said George Hays at their memorial service on April 6, 1945.

I would like to close my talk with a poem written by one of the Troopers. It is actually a song, and I regret that I (along with Horst and Owen and Dick and John) cannot sing it for you today. When the 10th Mountain Division was split up in 1943 and one of the three regiments was sent to the Aleutians, a soldier who remained behind wrote a poem about the event, set it to music, and sang it, accompanied by an accordion. In my humble opinion it was the best song to come out of WW II. The author was an academic casualty of the Great Depression: he never even finished college. He did, however, go on to a distinguished career as an environmentalist and received an honorary doctorate from Colorado College in 1976. Some of you knew him. His name was David Brower.

YOU'LL SOON BE MOVING OUT

David Brower 1943

Evening falls and gloomy black
  Crowds the western sky;
Down along the waiting track
  Soldiers say good bye.
Trained together, day by day,
  Now some move along;
Others sadly turn away
  And one sings this song:

You'll soon be moving out to fight,
  Your training days are through,
  It's anybody's guess where you will land.
I wish as I'm alone tonight
  That I were going too --
  Soldiering with you the way we planned.
Until our trails shall cross again
  And battle cries are still
  And lights of friendly life shine as before,
You'll share the lot of fighting men,
  Fighting with a will,
  Until that happy day you're home once more.

Just tonight I shook your hand,
  Saw you on your way,
Hoped that you would understand
  Words I couldn't say.
Days together, all too brief,
  Now have reached an end,
Leaving me a common grief --
  Parting with a friend.

The times we mopped the barracks floor,
  The talks we had at mess,
  The few and fleeting days we had to ski,
The times you beat my rifle score
  Or I took you at chess --
  All were fun to guys like you and me.
But since we've got that job to do
  Those days are over now.
  Better days may come but who knows when.
Keep your thumbs up, smile some too,
  Sweat it out somehow
  Til fortune lets me shake your hand again.