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History of Service in WWII

BEFORE CAMP HALE

During my senior year in high school in 1943, I decided that I would like to become a pilot in the V5 Navy Air Force Program that included two years of college and I took a train to Kansas City, Missouri, to take mental and physical exams. I passed everything in the exams but failed the hearing test because I could not hear the high pitches. As I was looking for another volunteer opportunity, a friend who was attending Harvard at the time told me of the request for volunteers in the ski troops. I completed an application and obtained three letters of recommendation that I submitted to the National Ski Patrol Association in New York City. My application was approved and since I was to be drafted after graduating from high school, they notified the reception center that I was to be sent to Camp Hale, Colorado, the location of the ski troops.

In July 1943 I was drafted and sent to the reception center in Leavenworth, KS. The staff at the center had no experience with volunteers for the ski troops, so they attempted to enlist me in the Air Force and the Navy, but after several days, they put me on a train to Camp Hale. The 10th Mountain was made up of 100% volunteers, many from well to do families from back East who had been skiers growing up.

EXPERIENCE AT CAMP HALE

Upon arrival at Camp Hale I was assigned to Company E of the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment as a Private in the first squad of the third platoon. Other members of the Company were on active duty, but I along with other enlistees was sent daily to basic training that involved learning to march and spending time at the rifle range.

There were 200 men in Company E and a total of 10,000 men at Camp Hale. There were 3 Regiments.

Later on, the 3 Mountain Regiments were formed into the 10th Mountain Division that also included mule pack (transportation of supplies) and other support units.

Company E had three barracks and its own Mess Hall. The barracks were specially designed with separate rooms at the entrance for skis and other mountain equipment and showers and rest room facilities.

We were issued rucksack packs, ski pants, a ski parka, a ski hat, ski boots, skis, poles and snowshoes; a mountain jacket and both heavy and light weight sweaters, gloves, goggles, rifle, a double down sleeping bag and a two man tent.

TRAINING

During summer and early fall we were taught the proper method of walking in the mountains. We were not to walk vertically, but diagonally. Camp Hale was situated at 9000 feet and we trained in areas reaching up to 13,000 feet.

We learned how to climb rock surfaces using hands to grab onto the crevices and feet to slide into a crevice when possible and also ropes and pitons (placed in the rock crevices). The ropes were also used for rappelling down to a lower level.

When the snow came, we marched to an area of flat ground where we used our skis and poles. The skis were seven foot six inches long and made of wood with steel edges and metal bindings. All of our skiing was traversing the slope with very little skiing downhill. On steep slopes we placed climbers made of animal fur on the bottom of the skis. The hair would flatten out when going forward and bristle when putting weight on it to keep you from going backwards down the slope.

When skiing to a bivouac area we carried a rucksack that weighed a total of 90 pounds plus an 8-pound M1 rifle on our back.

The two-man tent, which I shared with Joe Coiro, from New York City, was just big enough for two sleeping bags, had an air vent at each end and at one end a tunnel entrance which when dropped would close. The height of the tent was about four feet. We slept in the tents in the snow when it was four degrees below zero. Joe lost his life in combat.

Training involved camping in forested areas for several days. Kitchens provided food served buffet style into mess kits and large canteen cups. Coffee was made in 10-gallon garbage cans and ladled into our cups.

Cooper Hill was an open area on a mountain slope where a mile long T-Bar tow ski lift was built to be used for downhill skiing. This also gave us good training. Cooper Hill is now a commercial ski area. A monument dedicated to the men of the 10th mountain is located at the entrance to this ski area.

Camp Hale was completely dismantled, and the only trace remaining is the concrete of some streets.

FREE TIME

On weekends, a number of men at Camp Hale would drive personal cars to Denver going over Loveland Pass. My friend, George Schmid, whose parents lived in Denver, and I would drive his car to his home. He had a girl friend who would get me a date. George also lost his life during combat.

Other times we would spend our time in Leadville, which was only about fifteen miles from Camp Hale.

CAMP SWIFT, TEXAS

In June 1944 the entire 10th Mountain Division was transferred by train to Camp Swift near Austin, Texas for flatland training. The temperature from extreme cold to extreme hot was quite a change.

I had been a rifleman in the 3rd platoon from the time I joined the company in Camp Hale. While at Camp Swift I was transferred to the company headquarters to act as a radio operator and to do the daily morning reports. I was chosen because I had a good education and had used a radio as communications in the past. Because of this I escaped the heavy combat faced by my friends in the 3rd Platoon. I lost several very good friends who were killed or wounded.

A number of personnel were added to the Division to create heavy weapons companies in each battalion. Large machine guns and mortars were issued to each rifle company. The entire 10th Mountain Division had the lightest equipment for use at Camp Hale with the high elevation.

In December, we had orders to go to the East Coast where we embarked on the commercial liner, America. The America was much faster than comparable troop ships, and it zigzagged across the Atlantic Ocean in order to avoid German Submarines, since we were not being escorted by Navy Ships. We arrived at the port of Naples, Italy on January 13, 1945. Some units went from there by train but our unit went by Landing Craft Infantry or LCI. (This is a class of sea going amphibious assault ships used during WWII)

We sailed along the boot of Italy and disembarked at Leghorn, Italy.

ITALY – Our First Combat

We travelled by truck to a staging area near Pisa where we spent 7 days and were then transported to an area south of Mount Belvedere. Mount Belvedere overlooked one of the main highways through the Apennine Mountain Range. The German Army had placed many artillery positions on Mount Belvedere and on mountains surrounding it. Three American divisions and a Brazilian division had attempted to take the mountain but were unsuccessful.

The commanding officers of the 10th Mountain Division devised a plan whereby the 86th Regiment would surprise the Germans by scaling the mountains consisting of Riva Ridge at night on February 18th. By doing this they were able to take control of Riva Ridge in order that the other Regiments could make assaults on Belvedere. The 85th Regiment made the frontal assault on Belvedere on the following day and our unit, after being in reserve, sent up a defensive position on the backside of Belvedere. At night, German artillery was brought to bear on our position and German units attempted to drive us back. Our position was in a forested area where the shells would hit the trees and cause tree bursts which would either wound or kill many of our men.

The following day, with our remaining men, we took Monte Gorgolesco and then attacked Monte della Torraci. German resistance was fierce and our company and another company were unable to completely drive the Germans from the mountain. While I was standing next to the company commander he was struck by a sniper’s bullet and evacuated from the area. Our company had 63 men wounded and 9 killed. That day another company relieved company E and we retreated from the mountain to a small village nearby, Gaggio Montana. We were then trucked from there to Campo Tizzoro to a rest area where we were all given showers and clean clothes.

With each food ration containing canned meat and hard biscuits we were given 4 cigarettes in a box. While we were in combat, we were also supplied with a packet of American cigarettes each day. Thus I began to smoke and continued for 21 years.

ITALY – Monte Della Castellana

On the morning of March 5, 1945, company E attacked after a 20-minute artillery barrage against the slopes of Monte Della Castellana. The Germans had machine gun positions and a fortified house that we took after a lengthy assault. During that day we took 60 prisoners and had 4 men killed and 15 wounded.

During the next 15 days we dug foxholes on the mountain and held that position. The Germans shelled us every day, particularly if we moved around during daytime. Each night we sent out combat patrols into territory held by the Germans while I remained in a house that was the company headquarters. One nighttime patrol captured five German prisoners.

On March 22nd we were relieved from combat and sent to the rest center at Montecatini for three days. Montecatini is a spa town in the Apennine Mountains with hot springs and many hotels. We arrived by truck at about 08:30 hours and went through quartermaster shower and drew clean clothes. We were then assigned to hotels and issued cognac, wine and champagne. Many of our unit got drunk.

The next day at 13:00 hours we were trucked, tired and happy, for return to the front lines, foxholes, enemy fire, etc.

Whenever we had dead or wounded, men from the replacement depot replaced them.

ITALY – Monte Della Spe

We were supposed to attack Monte Della Spe on April 12, 1945 but that was the day that President Roosevelt died so the attack was called off. On April 14, after a 50-minute artillery barrage, the company started the attack at 09:45. A short time later the lead unit of our company encountered an area that was entirely mined with explosives, and we suffered heavy casualties. We reached the top of Monte Della Spe at 11:30. In this short period, we had 34 wounded and 7 killed out of 200 men.

ITALY – Into the Po Valley

We had crossed the Po River and were moving very fast to keep the Germans disorganized. Since the bridge across the river had been destroyed, supply was very difficult and was limited to men and ammunition, not food. Being out of Army rations, we had to eat off of the countryside. We bought eggs from the local peoples when they would sell them to us and often ate them raw. The locals also gave us bread and wine now and then.

After a short break we began our trek into the Po Valley on April 20th. The United States 5th Army had selected the 10th Mountain Division to lead the breakout from the mountains, and division headquarters requested the 85th mountain infantry regiment to lead the advance. Regiment selected the 2nd battalion to lead, and Battalion Headquarters told E company to go in front. Most of the time we walked, sometimes we could ride on trucks and sometimes on the back of tanks. The German mountain troops were in disarray and did not offer much resistance. We took many prisoners and just sent them back along the roads we had come forward on. We crossed the Po River at San Benedetto Po at night on April 23 in small paddleboats that were waiting for us. Each boat held 10 to 12 men. German airplanes firing machine gun bullets strafed us and luckily no one was hit. On the far shore we were reorganized and marched most of the rest of the night to a small farm hamlet where we dug in positions. We were eating our cold rations in our foxholes when an American unit shelled a nearby town on the other side of the river. The shelling stopped and the 88th division came across the river over the dyke and down on our positions with fixed bayonets looking for a fight with Germans. We stood up and waived our arms shouting, “Don’t shoot, it’s us, we are Americans”.

We then advanced North of the Po during the next few days mostly on foot. On April 27 we were transported by truck to the city of Garda at the south end of Lake Garda. We then went on foot north along the lake for 17 miles to the town of Malcesine, arriving about midnight in the rain. We remained there for several more days staying in old vacant buildings.

The only road was along the lake, and the surrounding mountains in some places extended out into the lake. At those locations tunnels had been drilled in order to continue the road. The 86th regiment moved north along the lake encountering German units in some of those tunnels. American manufactured DUKW (a 2 ½ ton amphibious truck) boats took troops into the Lake to advance past some destroyed tunnels. Our 85th regiment remained behind. During that operation one of the DUKW’s accidentally sank with the loss of the troops on board and was never recovered.

On May 2 the Germans in Italy surrendered. Our war was over, and we had survived, thank God! On May 7 the official surrender of Germany in Europe, VE, (Victory over Europe) Day became a reality.

THE WAR IS OVER

On May 15 we were trucked to the airport near Brescia to organize all of the POW’s from Northern Italy. On May 20 we were trucked from the Po Valley to the Venezia-Giulia region. Tito was making noises that he wanted to take back the region for Yugoslavia, so we were stationed in a blocking position to prevent that action. E-company was billeted in the vicinity of Tarcento in an open field where we set up camp in tents.

While in that location I received a pass with transportation to the Franz Josef Glacier in Austria. The mountains and the glacier were beautiful, and I enjoyed the free time away from the company. The pleasant surroundings and the delicious food were welcomed.

In July we were moved by train to Naples, Italy where we boarded a troop ship named Marine Fox and sailed to New York City. It was good to be back in the United States. We were given 30 days leave with orders to report to Camp Carson, Colorado when the leave was over. I rode the train from New York to Abilene arriving on August 15, 1945 and as I walked in the door to my parent’s home, President Truman was declaring by radio that the war with Japan had ended. I was very relieved to hear that because we had been informed that after our leave we would start preparing to be the second wave on the invasion of Japan.

In September I took the train to Camp Carson near Colorado Springs, Colorado where I reported for duty and spent several months before being discharged.

HOME

Swear words were used by most of the men and I found myself using them too. When I came home, my language changed and I no longer used these words.

I joined the 10th Mountain Division Association when George Rosenfield, from Melbourne, Florida, encouraged me to do so. The first reunion I attended was in Vail, Colorado. During this reunion George and I climbed Mt. Holy Cross, a 14,000-foot peak, which overlooked the Camp Hale site. My wife attended all reunions with me. We have gone to many reunions since then, including one held at Ft. Drum, the current 10th Mountain Division base.

In addition to these reunions, we have been to the battlegrounds in Italy in both 1991 and 1994. The Association sponsors these trips. In 1994, our three children joined us in Italy.