



THIS ARTICLE ABOUT ***THE LAST RIDGE*** IS AVAILABLE FOR PUBLICATION

The Highest Mountains, The Toughest Conditions, The Most Extraordinary Soldiers

February, 1945. World War II rages. In northern Italy, the 10th Mountain Division does the impossible, scaling a 2000 foot cliff on a freezing winter night to knock the Germans from their impenetrable perch. It's an understatement to say the 10th's success hung on a slender string: American military brass expected 90% casualties.

Now a one-hour documentary narrated by National Public Radio's Scott Simon tells the story of the 10th Mountain Division's uphill battles. Scheduled for national release in May, 2007 on public television stations, ***The Last Ridge*** chronicles how the 10th turned the tide for the Allies in Italy, revolutionized winter mountain warfare abroad and transformed winter sports at home.

Bill Brown, a 10th vet and former head of mountain operations at Vail recalled "We used to say combat was easier than training." Brown doesn't exaggerate, their training was back breaking. They lived outside for months at 13,000 feet elevation in sub-zero temperatures. No tanks, no trucks, no jeeps—just the men, their skis and whatever they could carry.

But the 10th's grueling training paid off with their astonishing success in battle under impossible conditions. According to military historian Flint Whitlock, "Mountains and winter are a deadly combination; just staying alive is a major consideration. It's very difficult to attack uphill, and whoever holds the high ground has the upper hand." Historian/Veteran John Imbrie explained the difficulties the 10th faced in battle: "Italy is essentially a series of ridges, and when once you take one ridge, there's another one. But by the time you get there, the Germans had prepared a brilliant defense."

There was always hype and heroism shrouding the 10th: they were treated like mythical gods descending from the clouds to re-assure a very scared American public. Some 10th soldiers were the superstars of their time, Olympic skiers and premiere mountaineers. There were men who pinned up pictures of mountains over their bunks. Men who lived and trained at altitudes pilots donned oxygen masks. But there was no glamour in battle: the 10th had one of the highest casualty rates in the Army.

10th Vet Ken MacDonald shuddered recollecting one battle. "We suddenly came under tremendous mortar fire. And I looked back down the hill where we had come up and everybody was dead or wounded. You're pretty brave at the start, because you don't know the consequences."

The Last Ridge weaves together re-creations, eyewitness accounts, archival film, and letters to help viewers understand the times and terrain. "World War II was the pivotal point of the 20th century, yet so many young people know little about it," notes producer Abbie Kealy.

“It was catastrophic, and its very outcome was in doubt. Would the world be Nazi or Democratic? The size of the forces was enormous, and most of the men had never fought before. It’s remarkable what the 10th accomplished under the most difficult conditions. ”

The original 10th continues to inspire today’s soldiers now deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. When current 10th soldier Sgt Kenyon Conley was wounded and hospitalized at Walter Reed, WW II vets came to visit. “The stories they tell us, the wisdom they give us, and the encouragement that they give us, help us to keep going no matter what,” Conley revealed.

The 10th was full of people with profound influence on the world. There wasn’t a ski resort in America that wasn’t touched in some way by the 10th. One vet founded NIKE. Another, Senator Bob Dole, ran for president. One was Director of the Sierra Club. A dozen made the Olympic ski team. Another coached that team.

“The older you get, you realize how important it was in your life--as long as you survived” reflected 10th vet Bob Yank.

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