

Watertown Daily Times

Film showcases history, heroics of 10th 'THE LAST RIDGE': Documentary on WPBS tonight; division's past and present soldiers laud effort

Date: Sunday, May 27, 2007

Section: Jefferson

Edition: Both

Page: B1

Dateline: FORT DRUM

By ALEC JOHNSON

TIMES INTERN

The 10th Mountain Division, the most-deployed division in the U.S. Army, also was the most-specialized division to serve in World War II. The soldiers of the 10th carried out one of the most harrowing missions of the war. The soldiers were trained at Camp Hill, Colo., specifically to fight on skis and survive without shelter in subzero conditions. On Feb. 18, 1945, 700 men from the 10th Mountain Division scaled a 2,000-foot sheer rock face called Riva Ridge in the dark of night to launch a surprise attack on a German camp, beginning the demise of the Germans' position in Italy.

The story of these heroic fighters was chronicled by Abbie E. Kealy, Reisterstown, Md., in a documentary to be aired nationally on the Public Broadcasting Service. Locally, the one-hour production, "The **Last Ridge**," will air at 7 p.m. today on WPBS, Watertown.

Ms. Kealy, a veteran documentary filmmaker, is a niece of Stuart Abbott, a 10th Mountain Division soldier killed in World War II. She was inspired to make the film by a collection of her uncle's wartime letters, ending with the telegram notification of his death in battle.

"I always wanted to tell the story from the average soldier's point of view," said Ms. Kealy, who used countless diaries and letters as supplements to 100 interviews to formulate a basis for re-enactments. "In letters and diaries, people are often more open, and it can be more powerful and compelling," she said.

"My uncle's nickname was 'Stretch.' I heard it for the first time when I was out to dinner with veterans last night," Ms. Kealy said Friday.

Bill Morrison, Voorheesville, a 10th Mountain Division veteran, served in the L-86 company with Mrs. Kealy's uncle while training in Colorado and in battle.

"He was in my platoon, a good guy, a rifle squad leader," Mr. Morrison said.

Mr. Morrison, who serves as president of the upstate New York chapter of the 10th Mountain Division National Association, called the project "a worthy goal," because when the older generation is gone, the current 10th will have to run the association.

"We really respect our heritage. You don't know where you're going if you don't know where you came from," said Maj. Gen. Michael L. Oates, Fort Drum post commander, after a screening of the documentary Friday afternoon at Fort Drum.

Gen. Oates called the production "inspirational," saying that 40 years from now, people will be looking back at the current division and what its members have done in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Staff Sgt. James Morton said "things like this are needed," echoing the sentiments of Gen. Oates, stressing the importance of soldiers knowing the history of their division.

"If we know what the standard is from the past, we know what is expected of us," he said.

The documentary will give the community a chance to learn about the 10th Mountain Division, which plays a large role in the north country.

"It is good to spread the story of who we are and why we are so specific with the documentary," Sgt. Morton said. "What we are doing in Afghanistan is very similar to the challenges faced in the past."

Nathan Morrell, East Rodman, a 10th Mountain Division veteran who served in northern Italy during World War II, was present at Friday's screening. Mr. Morrell joined the 10th Mountain Division on his 19th birthday, Jan. 14, 1943, and served until the division was deactivated after the war in 1945.

Originally from North Conway, N.H., Mr. Morrell said his love for skiing drew him to the division. He has been back to the battlefields in Italy about five times.

"We are very fortunate to have Abbie, who produced this on her own," Mr. Morrell said. "I'm 100 percent for what she is doing."

William Millette, a veteran present at a Friday morning memorial service at Fort Drum to honor those who have lost their lives in Afghanistan and Iraq, enjoyed the film.

"I think it's tremendous. You just can't do enough good publicity about what the 10th did and what it is doing today," he said.

Mr. Millette, who was drafted into the 10th, served in a pack artillery unit in which six cannoneers and six mule drivers transported 75 mm pack howitzers on mules in northern Italy. Mr. Millette never believed his division would make history.

"We were trained to do a job and we were doing it, that was it, and we were happy to stay alive," he said.

"The **Last Ridge**," narrated by National Public Radio's Scott Simon, was filmed in Colorado, Italy, Afghanistan and Slovenia by a three-member crew.