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and history buffs. In summer or winter, travelers can enjoy the beauty of the area, while at the same time following the tracks of its heroes.

The army's greatest sports school

Like many of his comrades, Over was a pioneer of the fairly new sport of skiing in the United States. He practiced ski jumping by packing snow around sloping

headstones in the local cemetery. Camp Hale's volunteers included captains of Ivy League ski teams, as well as Olympic competitors from countries such as Austria. Since the selection process was rigorous, many were world-class athletes.

Outsiders facetiously referred to the more-than-two-year boot camp as "The Army's Greatest Sports School" since each of the approximately 14,000 participants (three regiments of 3,000 troops each, plus support) specialized in either skiing at nearby Cooper Hill or snowshoeing. Soldiers also learned mountain climbing and riflery, and endured a six-week bivouac in such harsh conditions that one man purposely broke his leg to end the exercise.

Even with the time-consuming training, Over and his buddies found ways to have fun. The camp—named after Spanish-American War general Irving Hale—boasted 1,022 buildings including a service club, field house and theaters. Soldiers attended USO shows, featuring starlets such as Jane Wyman, and dances every Wednesday night with local women who were bused in.

With only 200 members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps at Camp Hale, potential dates were in short supply for the men. Some trainees headed to nearby Leadville.

Richard Over was a fresh-faced 17-year-old from Pittsburg, Penn., when he arrived at Colorado's Camp Hale on Feb. 22, 1943. America had officially been at war with Germany for more than a year, and Hitler was aiming for strategic positions in Italy's mountains. At the urging of National Ski Patrol founder Charles "Minnie" Dole, the United States had finally approved the creation of a high altitude training base.

In the final stages of a massive seven-month construction effort, Camp Hale was mired in mud. Over immediately wondered if he had made the right decision to enlist in the 10th Mountain Division, the first and only U.S. infantry division trained specifically for extreme terrain and cold weather warfare.

A month later, ski training started and Over was captivated. His visions of mud were replaced with soaring views of the White River Forest and the Pando Valley, the large flat basin where Camp Hale was located. Midway between Leadville and the current city of Vail, it was the ideal spot to train mountain troops—it had railroad and highway access, cliffs for climbing and towering mountains for schussing.

Today the region is an ideal destination for nature lovers

10th Mountain Division veterans at a recent reunion



CAMP HALE'S heroes *By Shelly Steig*

Earl Clark, an Army officer who was 22 at the time, says, "There weren't many women in Leadville. And some that were—were, well, professionals." Over had been told that the town was "full of coal miners and mule skinnners, and for entertainment they throw each other through plate glass windows." These working men didn't appreciate the influx of khaki-clad soldiers flirting with the local girls. The lopsided ratio of men to women caused tensions to soar and forced the base to intermittently ban visits to Leadville.

Crippling Hitler's Wermacht

Over's Camp Hale tenure ended with the division's assignment to war-ravaged Italy in January 1945. During two months of intensive fighting, the 10th breached Riva Ridge and Mount Belvedere in the Apennine Mountains. Clark, now 88, says, "The two key positions that the Germans had held for nine months, we took in 48 hours." Then in a strategic move that cut off supplies to Hitler's armies, the troops reclaimed the Po River Valley.

The price of victory was enormous. The 10th suffered the highest casualty rate of any division in the Mediterranean, with nearly 4,000 wounded and 999 killed. General Mark W. Clark, the Allied commander in Italy, later told survivors, "I look upon the action of the 10th Mountain as one of the most vital and brilliant in the campaign. Nothing, it seemed, could stop your drive. This is the aggressive spirit of which victory is made."

After the war, Camp Hale was deactivated. However, it was occasionally used through 1965 for exercises, including a six-year covert CIA training mission with Tibetan soldiers. In 1966, the Forest Service took possession of the base. Today little is left of Hale except a few concrete slabs and the memories of its alums. The 10th Mountain Division Association, Inc., has erected interpretive signs and visitors can pick up a self-guided tour brochure at the Leadville Chamber of Commerce.

Revisiting old stomping grounds

While the once raucous city of Leadville has been tamed, there are remnants of the World War II era. The Silver Dollar saloon, opened in 1883 and popular with soldiers in the 1940s, continues to operate. So does the Delaware Hotel.

To honor the men who served, U.S. Highway 24 between Leadville and Minturn has been designated the 10th Mountain Division Memorial Highway. Cooper Hill, now Ski Cooper, which is off Highway 24 approximately 10 miles north of Leadville, features a red granite monument engraved with the names of the fallen. Just adjacent is another large slab which honors the 99th Battalion, a Norwegian division which also trained at Hale and participated in campaigns such as the Battle of the Bulge.

A few miles north of Ski Cooper lies the land on which 10th soldiers bonded with each other and with the soaring landscape. The self-guided tour has 10 stations, including one

that explains Camp Hale's role in developing winter gear and vehicles to move the troops. The army researched different types of snowmobiles and motorized toboggans, and developed the M15 Weasel, a lightweight tracked machine which traveled easily over ice and snow.

Nowadays visitors can ride the Camp Hale terrain on ATVs in the summer, or snowmobiles, snowcoaches or dogsleds in winter, with local outfitters Nova Guides. The company also has two cabins available for rent and a lodge with restaurant on the former Camp Hale grounds.

"The love of
the mountains was
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Magnetic mountains

The memorial highway continues winding north through some of Colorado's most beautiful vistas to the town of Minturn, home to some soldiers' families during the war years. About a dozen miles northeast is Vail, host

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IF YOU GO

10th Mountain Division Association, Inc.:
www.10thmtdivassoc.org

10th Mountain Division Hut Association:
970-925-5775, www.huts.org

Colorado Ski Museum/Ski & Snowboard Hall of Fame: 970-476-1876, www.skimuseum.net

Leadville/Lake County Chamber of Commerce: 800-933-3901, www.leadvilleusa.com

Minturn Visitor Information: 970-827-5645, www.minturn.org

Nova Guides: 888-949-6682, www.novaguides.com

Ski Cooper: 800-707-6114, www.skicooper.com

Vail Visitor Information: 888-605-7573, www.vail.com



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to the Colorado Ski Museum and Ski & Snowboard Hall of Fame. The museum offers an exhibit dedicated to the 10th Mountain Division that includes a diorama, film and artifacts.

During Hale's heyday, Vail was simply a snow-covered mountain. But 10th veteran Pete Seibert recognized its potential and turned it into the world-class resort of today. Seibert is not the only Hale trainee to impact the world of sports. At one time, 62 ski resorts were either founded or managed by veterans. Nike shoes, the National Outdoor Leadership School and the Wilderness Education Association also owe allegiance to Hale's alums.

Another veteran, Fritz Benedict, inspired the 10th Mountain Division Hut Association, named to honor the soldiers' self-reliance and love of the outdoors. The 29 backcountry huts are connected by 350 miles of moderate to difficult trails. Some are named for veterans or were built with funds donated by 10th alums. The huts are available year-round by reservation for hikers, cyclists, skiers and snowshoers.

The hut system is a fitting tribute to the men who learned to love the peaks on which they trained. Many have made Colorado their home, and some have chosen to have their ashes scattered on Camp Hale's grounds. Over, now 81, said, "The love of the mountains was the key to the whole thing. Having been there through two winters and three summers, and the training we had...it was something that draws a lot of us back."

Earl Clark echoed that sentiment. "It was not the military experience that bonded this group together. It was the mountain. The love of mountaineering was the glue." ■

Parker-based freelancer Shelly Steig spent 20 years as an Air Force wife and has a soft spot for veterans.



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