

Whiteface Mountain

and the

10th Mountain Division

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Lake Placid and neighboring Wilmington will see lots of visitors this Memorial Day weekend — but most will probably be unaware of the connection between the Adirondack Mountains and one of the Army's most storied units, the 10th Mountain Division.

Men from the 10th punctured the German lines in northern Italy's Appenine Mountains in the last months of World War II.

Soldiers from the modern 10th served in Somalian peacekeeping operations in 1993, rescuing a group of Army Rangers in the incident later made famous by the movie, "Blackhawk Down."

Tenth Mountain troops were among the first deployed to Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks of September 2001.

They are currently part of an ongoing anti-terrorist task force based in tiny Djibouti, on the Red Sea in eastern Africa.

And they continue to serve in Iraq.

Today the 10th Mountain Division is headquartered out of Fort Drum, just outside Watertown, a natural base for a unit specializing in, among other things, mountain and winter warfare.

It was the winter-sports expertise of men from the Olympic Region that created the initial connection between Lake Placid, Wilmington and the 10th Mountain Division in the runup to America's involvement in World War II.

It was the continuing connection that led to the dedication of the Whiteface Mountain Ski Center to the 10th Mountain Division when the facility was opened in 1958.

Creation of the 10th

In November 1939 the mighty Soviet Union invaded tiny Finland. The Red

army was turned back by a small but extremely effective force of Finnish ski troops.

The lesson of that encounter was not lost on the United States.

A year later, prodded by National Ski Patrol chairman Charles Minot Dole, the U.S. Army began forming its own ski troops. The very first ski-patrol unit, under the command of U.S. Olympic team captain Rolf Monson, started training in November 1940 in Lake Placid out of barracks at the Plattsburgh Army Air Base.

Gradually, the commitment to build a force capable of fighting on the snowy heights of the Europe's mountains led to the commitment of a full Army division based at Camp Hale, high in the Rockies

near Pando, Colorado.

The 10th Mountain Division shipped out to Italy late in 1944. Their first mission: capture Mount Belvedere, where German artillery had prevented the Americans from marching forward into the Po Valley.

It was dangerous work, but there was no one else to do it.

When Brig. Gen. George Hayes, commander of the 10th, was given the assignment in January 1945, he reportedly asked, "Who is going to share the bullets with us when we attack?"

"No one," came the reply from Fifth Army Gen. L.K. Truscott.

After deploying several scouting parties, the real assault on Belvedere began just after midnight the night of Feb. 19-20, 1945, with five battalions climbing the ridge rising 2,000 feet above the rushing Dardagna River.

One of the mountain troops injured in that attack was young Pfc. John F. Dixon, the son of Mrs. Curtis Stevens of Lake Placid.

Jack Dixon, president of Lake Placid High School's Class of 1943 and salutatorian at that year's commencement exercises, had enlisted the February after his graduation. Taking a serious head wound in the assault on Belvedere, he was sent back to the States for medical



Since the first day it opened Wilmington's Whiteface Mountain, host to the 1980 Olympic Winter Games, has been dedicated to the fabled 10th Mountain Division.

treatment, finishing out the war in an Army hospital on Staten Island.

A break in the action gave Jack's comrades a chance to write a group letter home to him in the hospital. The letter was penned on April 12, 1945.

"The fellows are all sitting around planning how we will have a yearly reunion after the war is over," wrote Chuck Warren, "and, who knows, maybe we'll have it up at Lake Placid."

The day that letter was postmarked, April 14, the 10th Mountain Division began its final push northward. It was the unit's bloodiest engagement of the war; over the next 4 days, 290 men died and 1,059 were wounded.

Finally, in May 1945, the German army surrendered.

"You wouldn't recognize the company any more," wrote Ralph Hebel in a May 31 letter to Dixon, three weeks after the surrender. "The old ones who have lasted through both drives, in most cases, were wounded once, some twice. ... Our casualties in obtaining the heights were close to 75 percent — even more if the shock cases were included."

Hebel spent two pages reciting the names of dead and wounded ski troopers Dixon would have known.



10th Mountain Division troops move into northern Italy's Po Valley on April 19, 1945.

'Uncle Art'

One of the medics ministering to the wounded of the 10th Mountain Division in the Appenines was Arthur Draper, Caroline Lussi's father.

"My dad was much older than the rest," Lussi said in an interview on

Monday in her Lake Placid Resort office. "They called him Uncle Art.

"It was gruesome fighting in Italy. My dad was a medic. He didn't have any training in surgery, but he performed surgery anyway, out of necessity, to save lives."

Draper had enlisted in the mountain troops when he was already in his 30s.

Son of the foreign editor of the Herald-Tribune, as a young New York Times reporter Draper had been assigned to cover a dedication ceremony of some sort atop Mount Marcy.

"Standing there, looking out on the mountains, he asked himself, 'Why am I living in the city?'" his daughter recalled him saying.

It wasn't long before Draper was promoting the "snow trains" bringing ski tourists into North Creek. Later, as a Conservation Department ranger, he worked with Lake Placid's Henry Wade Hicks to develop skiing in the Olympic Village.

And then came the war.

"They were a very close-knit bunch, the men of the 10th," Lussi said. "I heard them tell plenty of stories about the places they'd been in Italy — but never about the combat. It was just too horrible."

Draper stayed in touch with his former comrades in arms after returning to the Adirondacks, opening the Marble



A machine gunner and two riflemen of the 10th Mountain Division cover an assault squad routing Germans out of a building in northern Italy on March 4, 1945.



A 10th Mountain ski trooper takes a break on Mount Grande, Feb. 22, 1945.

Mountain ski center, editing *The Conservationist*, then running the Belleayre ski operation in the Catskills.

There, Draper became friends with then-Gov. Averil Harriman. According to Lussi, the two worked on the state constitutional amendment allowing the development of a ski center within the “forever wild” Forest Preserve on Whiteface Mountain. After the amendment passed, Harriman named Draper to become the facility’s first general manager.

Naturally enough, “Uncle Art” saw to it that New York’s great ski mountain, later to host the region’s second winter Olympics, was dedicated to the alpine troops of his beloved 10th Mountain Division. Leading a contingent of ski-troop veterans attending the opening of Whiteface on Jan. 25, 1958, and the ceremony dedicating the mountain to the 10th was Gen. Hayes himself.

SINCE THEN, the 10th Mountain Division has not only been reactivated, but it has been based in nearby Fort Drum, cementing the unit’s North Country connection.

Scions of the Olympic Village have continued to join the 10th, too, men like Johnny Bickford, 23, grandson of WW2 ski soldier Jack Dixon. Now a sergeant, Bickford joined the Army in mid-2001, a year after graduating from Lake Placid High School.

Bickford’s first deployment was to the Sinai desert after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. That was followed by a longer — and much more dangerous — assignment to Afghanistan.

“The last few days have been really tough for me,” Bickford wrote in a February letter home to his mom, Amy Bickford. “I lost one of my closest friends. His name was Robert Cook. He came home with me once, and you met him at the Thirsty Moose.

“This is what happened. A weapons cache was found, and while moving it, it blew up. We don’t know if it was booby trapped, or just unstable powders.

“We had the memorial service yesterday. It was very hard. I have to be strong for my young guys. I have to hide sometimes because I can’t help but cry,” the young sergeant wrote his mom.

Three other soldiers died that day with Cook. According to Major Daniel Bohr, media relations officer for Fort Drum, it was the single deadliest day for the 10th Mountain Division in Afghanistan. A total of 10 men from the 10th lost their lives in that deployment.

Besides the danger of the Afghan mission, living conditions for 10th Mountain Division soldiers were extremely challenging.

“We live in a compound with mud walls and sleep 30 guys in a tent,” Bickford wrote in February. “We have no running water. I haven’t had a shower in over 30 days. Morale is at

an all-time low.”

Bickford’s unit returned to Fort Drum last week.

“He touched down at 8:30 last Sunday (May 16),” Amy Bickford told the News. “We’re very lucky to have him home, and safe. We heard so little news from Afghanistan — except when someone was killed.”

Despite the challenges, Sgt. Bickford recently re-enlisted for another 4 years in the Army. He does not expect to be deployed again for at least another year. In the meantime he has already started schoolwork to enter the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division.

Those who wish to welcome Bickford home may attend a gathering at the American Legion at 316 Main St. in Lake Placid this Friday, May 28, at 5 p.m.



The plaque above is affixed to the peak of Little Whiteface, below, at the top of the Cloudsplitter gondola on Whiteface Mountain in Wilmington.

