

INSIDE PEOPLE



A last reunion for the 10th Mountain Division

[By John Wilkens]

They made history and gradually they're becoming it. Every day in America, an estimated 1,000 World War II veterans die.

The strong bonds they formed with each other when they were young and the world needed saving have spawned reunions in every corner of the country for a half-century now. But that, too, is changing.

Take the 10th Mountain Division, a storied Army unit that used rock-climbing gear and skis to defeat the Germans in Italy near the end of the war. The group's national reunion in Colorado last month was billed as probably the last one ever - at least the last one organized by the veterans themselves.

About 300 veterans attended, men in their 80s and 90s mostly, including Howard Harvey of San Diego. They're counting on their descendants - about 300 of them also attended - to keep the 10th Mountain's legacy alive.

"It's time for the next generation to take over," Harvey said.

For many of the Americans who fought in it, World War II was the defining period of their lives. So much was at stake, and they knew it. Victorious, they came home to help usher the nation to prominence and prosperity.

Their stories have been glorified in books ("The Greatest Generation") and movies ("Saving Private Ryan"), and this month PBS

is scheduled to air "The War," a seven-part epic from acclaimed documentary filmmaker Ken Burns.

But it's only when they're together, at reunions, that they feel surrounded by people who really understand what they went through.

"There's just a connection," Harvey said. "We're very, very close."

Even today, more than 60 years after the war ended, he can recall instantly specific combat dates and places. He knows the identifying numbers of the other infantry units that fought alongside his. He remembers the distinctive sound of German machine guns.

Born 85 years ago in Canada, Harvey grew up in Ocean Beach, Calif., and was more comfortable in the surf than the snow. When he heard about the new mountain warfare unit that was being formed, he wanted no part of it.

"I didn't think I could handle the training," he said.

As it turned out, he was a natural on skis. Offered a chance to transfer to a different unit, he declined. He became a radio specialist in the 10th Mountain.

After training at Camp Hale in Colorado, not far from Leadville, the division was shipped overseas to Italy at the end of 1944.

A key objective was Mount Belvedere, a German stronghold in the northern Apennines. Three times American forces had tried to take the mountain, and three times they had been pushed back.

In February 1945, a battalion using climbing ropes scaled the cliffs and surprised the Germans. American forces took Belvedere, then Mount Della Torraccia, and by late March they had secured all the surrounding ridges, helping clear the way for a spring offensive through the Po Valley.

By early May, the war was over. The 10th Mountain Division, despite its relatively short period in combat, sustained casualties of about 25% - more than 900 dead and more than 3,800 wounded.

Harvey said the 10th Mountain Division has held national reunions every three years, in different parts of the country. "It's usually in mountains," he said, "because that's where we trained."

He's gone to six of them - one in Italy. "It's just a chance to rub elbows with some outstanding guys," he said. Some of the veterans skied in the Olympics after the war. Two of them developed the ski resort at Vail.



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Harvey came back to San Diego when his service ended and worked for Marston's department store, where he met his future wife, Marian. They will celebrate their 55th anniversary in December.

He put the skis away for several decades, then got back on them in the 1980s and skied

until he was 82, stopping a few years ago because of a heart condition, he said.

This may have been the group's last national reunion, but Harvey said the veterans are still finding ways to get together in smaller groups. He and one of his buddies talk on the phone every week.

Some of the veterans took what they said would be their final trip to Italy last year. "But they're already planning another one," Harvey said. Maybe history can wait.

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