



SOLDIERS ON SKIS

SKILLS IN THE
MOUNTAINS
SUCCESS IN BATTLE

At least 14 Putney alumni served in the 10th Mountain Division of the U.S. Army during WWII, the infantry responsible for defeating Germany's final defensive line in Northern Italy in February 1945, signaling the end of fighting in the European theater.

Ski warfare dates back centuries, but this division represented the first time the U.S. military had embarked on training its soldiers for the mountains. In reality, the civilian skiers, like those 14 Putney alumni, trained the U.S. military. "Those skills have always been best found in the civilian skiing and mountaineering communities,"

MOST OF YOUR SKIERS, MOUNTAINEERS, WERE IN THE EAST, IN PLACES LIKE VERMONT AND WITH PEOPLE WHO WOULD HAVE ATTENDED THE PUTNEY SCHOOL. THOSE WERE THE KIND OF PEOPLE WHO HAD THOSE SKILLS AT THAT TIME.



From the 10th Mountain Division archives. Photo top left, George Heller '42 (back row, second from right), Donald Marburg '37 (group photo, far left), and Lawrie Brown '42 (bottom right photo, second from left)

said Lance Blyth, a military historian and author of *Ski, Climb, Fight: The 10th Mountain Division and the Rise of Mountain Warfare*. "In the late 1930s and early 1940s, most of your skiers, most of your mountaineers, were in the east, in places like Vermont and with people who would have attended The Putney School. Those were the kind of people who had those skills at that time." The American 10th Mountain Division was modeled on the Finnish. In 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Finland with significantly more troops and weaponry. But the Finnish soldiers, being expert skiers, utilized the terrain to their advantage, defeating the Soviet army. The American soldiers were well equipped for their keystone battle on Italy's Riva Ridge at an altitude of 6,000 feet.

"They'd spent so much time in the mountains, so much time outside that they were very capable. They were expert campers," said Blyth. "They stayed out for days in the wet and cold, and they knew how to take care of themselves. They didn't take any exposure casualties or frostbite or trench foot." The 10th Mountain Division was deactivated after the war (then reactivated in 1948 and deactivated again in 1958). It was again reactivated at Fort Drum, in New York, in the 1980s, but it was not a mountain division, and was only called that for heritage purposes. However, the last two commanders of the division have sought to return it back to its alpine roots, and are focusing on getting more troops through military mountain training which takes place, as it happens, at the Army Mountain Warfare School in Jericho, Vermont. ■

LIST OF ALUMNI
KNOWN TO HAVE
SERVED IN THE 10TH
MOUNTAIN DIVISION
DURING WWII:

- McGregor Gray '37
- Donald Marburg '37
- Bing Briggs '38
- Roger Wilson '39
- Ted Moore '40
- Roy Richardson '40
- Donald Watt Jr '40
- John Quisenberry '42
- J. Allen Johnson '43
- Allen Schaffler '43
- Lawrie Brown '42
- Eliot Buckingham '42
- Donald Ross Green '42
- George Heller '42