



# Vail's Veterans

Vail founder Pete Seibert (left), 10th Mountain Division veteran

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By: **Sarah L. Stewart**

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## How a group of highly specialized World War II soldiers transformed the Colorado ski industry.

Sandy Treat was just 19 years old when he arrived at Camp Hale, Colorado—9,300 feet high in the Rocky Mountains, 30 miles south of Vail. The year was 1942. Nazi Germany occupied a broad swath of Europe, and the United States had entered World War II just a year earlier. Treat, a member of the ski team at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, had volunteered to join an elite, newly formed group of Army soldiers who were training to fight in the mountains: the 10th Mountain Division.



*Soldier David B. Allen in the 10th Mountain Division "winter whites" at Camp Hale. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library. Top (left to right): Early Vail leaders and 10th Mountain Division veterans Pete Seibert (founder), Bob Parker, and Bill "Sarge" Brown. Courtesy of the Colorado Ski and Snowboard Museum photo archives.*



Camp Hale, set in a large, flat valley ringed by 11,000-foot peaks, was brand new when Treat arrived. The barracks and infirmary still smelled of fresh paint, a scent soon supplanted by the smog of soft coal burned for heat, Treat recalls. In more than two years at Camp Hale, Treat and his fellow soldiers would endure unimaginably harsh winters, undergo rigorous training exercises toting 90-pound packs, and, ultimately, gain the skills and confidence necessary to wage a successful campaign against the Germans when they were deployed to Italy's Apennine Mountains in 1945. "It was an amazing experience," says Treat, 91, who lives just west of Vail in the town of Edwards. "We had to learn—how do you fight in the high mountains like this?"



Treat is one of a dwindling number of 14,000 men who trained and fought in the 10th Mountain Division during World War II, and who still survives to recount his experiences firsthand. Yet the legacy of the 10th lives on, not only through its decorated military history, but also by way of a secondary beneficiary: Colorado's ski mountains.

"The 10th is the underpinning of



*Eugene S. Hames, WWII. Courtesy of Tom Hames.*

the entire Colorado ski industry,” says Susie Tjossem, executive director of the Colorado Ski and Snowboard Museum in Vail. Virtually every ski resort in the state can trace some piece of its heritage back to a 10th Mountain Division veteran, Tjossem says—

and perhaps none more directly than Vail. Founded by late 10th veteran Pete Seibert, who also recruited some of his fellow ski troopers to develop the resort, Vail is a prime example of the unique, enduring relationship between the state’s dramatic landscape, its world-class ski resorts, and the 10th Mountain Division veterans. “They became very familiar with Colorado’s high country and fell in love with it,” Tjossem says. “The mountains meant something to them.”

## Heroes Of Winter

If you’ve ever wandered the cobblestone streets of Vail Village, chances are you’ve noticed the imposing, 13-foot-tall statue of a soldier dressed all in white near the iconic covered bridge over Gore Creek. The figure, marching in a state of suspended motion and toting a rifle and skis, pays tribute to the thousands of men who trained at Camp Hale, as well as the nearly 1,000 division soldiers killed in action and more than 4,000 that were wounded.

One 10th veteran who returned home safely from battle was the late Eugene Hames. Hames, who

earned a Bronze Star for his actions overseas, didn't speak much about his experience in the war, recalls his son, division historian Tom Hames. But he remembers his father's stories from his time at Camp Hale, including a memorable maneuver called the "D-Series," a weeks-long training mission in the spring of 1944. Troops were pushed to their limits in sub-zero temperatures and feet of snow, struggling to stay warm in cotton and wool clothing as they skied miles through the alpine backcountry. "(Camp Hale and the war) were both pretty strong crucibles of character," Hames says. In 114 days of combat, the 10th captured several German strongholds in the mountains of Italy and drove the Germans toward surrender in that country. Upon returning home, Hames says, "They felt like they could take the world by storm."





*10th Mountain Division soldiers train at Camp Hale. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library and Colorado Ski and Snowboard Museum photo archives.*

This heady optimism, coupled with a fondness for Colorado's mountains, led many 10th Mountain Division veterans to seek new horizons and settle in Colorado once the war was over. And so the groundwork was laid for the next chapter of the division's storied legacy in the state: skiing.

### A Vision For Vail

If there was an unlikely candidate to launch a ski resort after the war, it might have been 10th veteran and Massachusetts native Pete Seibert. Badly wounded in the war, Seibert was told he'd never ski again, and he spent more than a year recovering in Army hospitals.

Seibert proved his doctors wrong. He recuperated and returned to Europe to study resort management for several years before coming back to Colorado with mission to found a resort of his own. "He started looking in



*Ski training on Eagle Ridge at Camp Hale, 1943 or 1944. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library.*

Colorado for the perfect ski mountain,” Tjossem says. “He had in his mind a model from Europe.”

In 1957, friend and fellow Army veteran Earl Eaton led Seibert up then-unnamed Vail Mountain to the crest of a ridge overlooking the now-famous Back Bowls. “As soon as (Seibert) saw that vista, he was sold,” Tjossem says. “It had all the ingredients that he wanted.”



*The 10th Mountain Division's F Company on Riva Ridge (the namesake of Vail Mountain's longest run) in Italy during WWII (1945). Courtesy of the Denver Public Library.*

The rest is written into Vail history. Seibert’s dream became a reality when the resort opened in 1962, and its success was almost immediate—but not without the help of other 10th veterans. Seibert recruited former ski troopers, including savvy marketing manager Bob Parker, exacting mountain manager Bill “Sarge” Brown, and longtime board member Ben Duke. Without the contributions of these men, Vail as we know it would not exist,

Tjossem says. “Their names became synonymous with Vail.”

If you look closely, the story of the 10th Mountain Division is written all over Vail: Even the

mountain's longest run, four-mile-long Riva Ridge, takes its name from a German stronghold seized by the division during the war. "They had a lot of accomplishments, both as a division and as individuals," Hames says. "It's a great legacy."

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