

Old soldiers ski the 10th Trail

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At close to 12,000 feet above sea level, in the Hunter Creek drainage north of Aspen, the air has to be sucked a little deeper into the lungs.

Add a 40-pound backpack for good measure while skiing up a steep hillside, and you've got all the ingredients of an outdoor outing that makes you wish you'd run that extra lap in last week's training session.

But the seven men of the 10th Mountain Division continued at a brisk pace. So brisk, in fact, that a couple of them left their younger counterparts — less than half their age — in a cloud of powdery snow.

The unlikely surge of energy could easily be attributed to the fine physical condition these gray-haired former ski troopers have maintained. But there was something else — something intangible that kept their legs churning and their faces smiling.

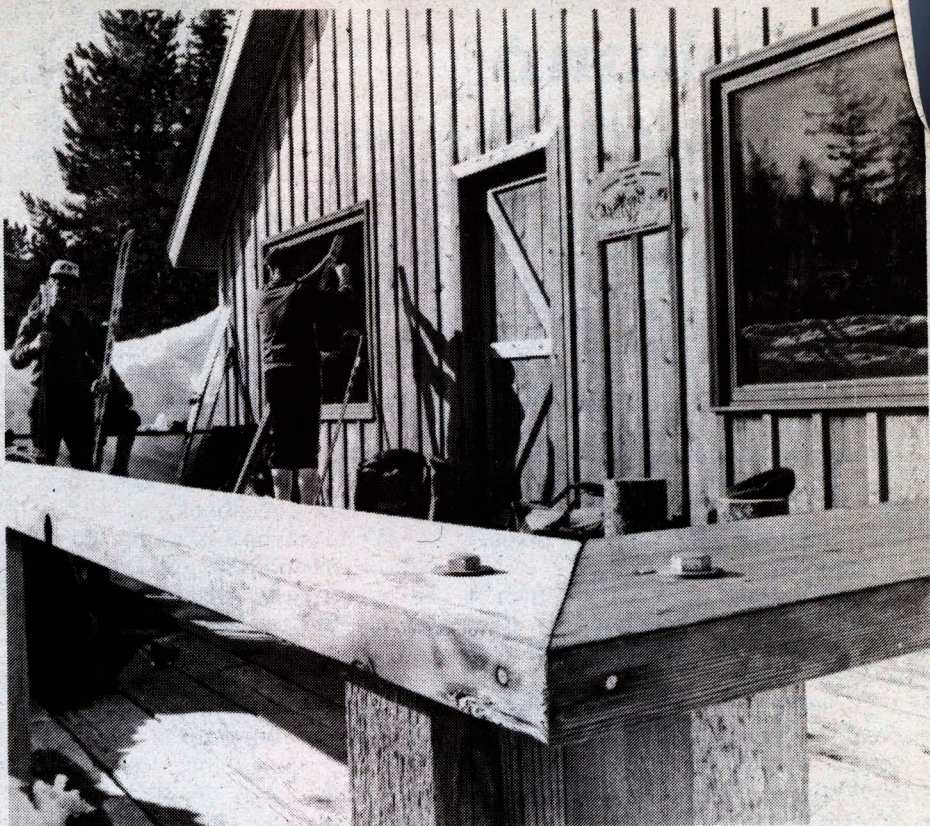
They were skiing on a trail that carried their name. The 10th Mountain Trail. Named for the soldiers who trained in the Colorado mountains, fought in the Italian Alps, and then returned to the Rockies to develop a fledgling ski industry.

The 10th Mountain Trail is a 32-mile scenic, and sometimes strenuous, trek from Aspen to Sylvan Lake above Eagle. Currently, a series of four huts and lodges are strategically located to provide overnight accommodations for skiers on the trail.

The trail received its name in honor of 10th Mountain Division troops who first forged the route after completing a bridge-building assignment near Aspen in the summer of 1942. Although the soldiers and their mules were turned back when they encountered a snow cornice in the Williams Mountains, a contingent of ski troopers were successful the following year when they made a four-day alpine trek from Camp Hale, north of Leadville, to Aspen.

If funding can be obtained, trail organizers hope to build two more huts that would allow cross-country skiers to ski from Aspen to the Eagle Valley.

On a recent March weekend, a handful of 10th veterans and their sons skied the trail from Aspen to the Diamond J Guest Ranch above Ruedi. The three-day trek included overnight stays at McNamara Hut and Margy's Hut, both constructed in the summer of 1982 under the guidance of 10th



McNAMARA HUT is a welcome sight for cross-country skiers who have made the six-mile climb from Aspen on the 10th Mountain Trail. McNamara, and its sister hut, Margy's, were built in 1982 as part of a plan to provide overnight accommodations on the trail that will ultimately lead from Vail to Aspen. The fully-furnished huts sleep 15.

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veteran and Aspen architect Fritz Benedict.

The huts comfortably sleeps 15, and include wood-burning stoves, firewood and kitchen utensils. Skiers must provide their own food and sleeping bags.

McNamara Hut is located six miles outside of Aspen between the Hunter Creek and Woody Creek valleys. Margy's Hut is eight miles further, resting above 11,000 feet elevation near the top of Mt. Yeckel.

"We placed 'em six or eight miles apart so old farts like us could make it," said the smiling, 70-year-old Benedict.

And the old, uh, ski troopers did make it, but not without a fair amount of sweat, panting and strained muscles.

The first day's six-mile trek involves an elevation gain of 2,500 feet. The second day begins with a quick, exciting downhill run of about three miles with an elevation

loss of 1,000 feet, followed by a slow, tough uphill climb of five miles and 1,800 feet altitude gain.

The third day, much to everyone's delight, is eight miles of delightful downhill cruising to the Diamond J.

Cross-country skiers contemplating the trip should be in pretty good shape, and should prepare for all types of weather conditions — anything from 50 degrees in the blazing sunshine to howling blizzards with only a few feet of visibility.

And after a strenuous day on the trail, skiers should prepare for a comfortable evening in the huts, with crackling fires, simmering food, and perhaps a sip or two of a favorite libation.

For more information on the trail system, or to make reservations for hut accommodations, write to the 10th Mountain Trail Association, 1280 Ute Ave., Aspen 81611, or call 925-3481.