

ONLY TOUGHEST SURVIVE ORDEAL OF SKI TROOPS

Zero Weather Is Mild for Trainees in Rockies.

BY FRANK STURDY.

[Chicago Tribune Press Service.]

Camp Hale, Colo., March 3.—Mountain fighters are being trained here in one of the coldest and most rugged sections of the Rocky mountains at an elevation that puts a premium on the mere pitting of man against the elements.

The mountain training center, a collection of frame barracks constructed within the last 10 months, is on Pando flat in a valley about 4 miles long and ½ mile wide, cupped in a ring of jagged peaks.

On the flat, the elevation is 9,357 feet. The slopes of the surrounding mountains, rutted and pine wooded, rise to 12,000 feet.

Winters Are Lengthy.

Winter arrives early and stays late. Snow on the mountainsides never is less than 3 or 4 feet deep in the cold months, drifting in some places to tremendous depths.

A temperature of zero marks a chilly but otherwise unremarkable day. Usually the temperature is 10 to 20 degrees below zero, and once this winter it fell to 37.

This is where thousands of men are learning to live a new life in which carelessness means frostbite or possibly death. Exertions that take little energy in the lowlands cause the heart to pound and the lungs to gasp for air that is razor thin, short in oxygen.

New recruits require at least a couple of months to become sufficiently acclimated to perform normally and there are some who apparently cannot become adjusted to thin atmosphere. These men are chronically mountain sick and are reassigned to other branches.

The ones whose systems prove adaptable get the best of cold weather accoutrements and the ski and snowshoe training that are specialties of the mountain trooper. Each man's personal clothing and fighting equipment cost about \$750.

The soldier's first eight weeks are spent in basic infantry school. Then he puts on for the first time the skis on which he will travel and fight. The next 40 days are the recruit's best. Half of each day is spent on skis, about the fatigue limit. When he finishes the course he is capable of cross country travel with a 50 pound pack on his back.

Marches Into Wilds.

His battle with the unrelentingly hazardous snows, winds, blizzards, and snowslides begins with bivouac marches into the wilds for periods of several days.

The experiences of this winter, officers freely concede, have proved that mountain troops require considerable practice in beating the elements. The majority of the troops here have been in training only a few months and the best of them are far from finished.

Making camp doesn't mean simply pitching a tent. It means packing the snow down by tramping it with snowshoes and skis, laying a foundation of boughs for tents, melting snow to cook dehydrated foods over a tiny, one burner gasoline stove, changing wet clothing for dry despite the bitter breezes, and finally, crawling into a down sleeping bag for the night.

Tough for Artillery.

The artillery units have the toughest grind of all the mountain troopers. Their 75 mm. pack howltzers are packed on mules which frequently tire of plowing thru belly deep snow and stop dead, quite willing to wait on the spot for a spring thaw. Mountain artillerists who have survived this experience say life can hold no further bitterness.

Despite all the hardships of the mountain troops, a large part of the division is made up of volunteers. The most enthusiastic were ski experts or at least ski amateurs before joining. There are plenty of grumblers. Most of them, officers say, are men who had never skied and thought they were in for a life of winter sport. Between the two lies the majority.

The program is still an experimental testing ground for equipment and methods. One of the problems confronting the training officers is the impossibility of predicting where the troops will fight: In the peaks and glaciers of the Alps, the flatter lands of Norway, the snow wastes of Siberia, or the jungle mountains of the South Pacific.

Later, it is planned to develop troops with training adapted to special types of mountain terrain.

The organization of the division at present brings it to about 12,000 men—infantry, pack artillery, engineers, quartermaster, signal, and ordnance troops, a medical unit, and a reconnaissance troop.