

Book Reviews

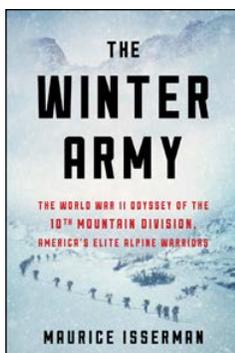


The Winter Army, The World War II Odyssey of the 10th Mountain Division, America's Elite Alpine Warriors

By Maurice Isserman

NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,
2019, 336 pages

Reviewed by CPT Craig Penley



From Napoleon's invasion into Russia in 1812 and Hitler's failed 1941 Russian campaign, history has proven time and time again that the cold is a more daunting foe than the enemy. In his book *The Winter Army*, Maurice Isserman skillfully recreates the story of how America recognized the threat brutally cold weather imposes on an army and developed what became known as the 10th Mountain Division. While mainly written as a historical rendition of the 10th Mountain Division's legacy, the book has applications for skiing and outdoor enthusiasts or for Soldiers training in extreme cold-weather conditions.

Using primary sources, Isserman recreates the story of the 10th Mountain Division's birth. He masterfully crafts this World War II history from personal letters and official military correspondence. In Isserman's work, local and national newspapers corroborate events discussed in Soldiers' letters. The reader gets to know the Soldiers and civilians who took the idea of ski troopers and created the only American Army division specialized for mountainous and arctic conditions.

Although there is no main character in Isserman's book, one personality stands out amongst all the others. His name is Charles Minot "Minnie" Dole, who is credited as the founder of the mountain troopers. In 1940, the German army possessed three full mountain divisions with the finest trained and equipped winter and mountain troops in the world. Out of the fear of a potential British defeat and a German invasion of Canada, Dole realized America needed elite mountain Soldiers. As the founder and director of the National Ski Patrol System, he lobbied the United States War Department to create a unit of ski troopers, which later became the 10th Mountain Division. He based his vision off the white-camouflage-clad Finnish ski soldiers who repelled a Russian invasion for three months in 1940. Dole considered these Soldiers to be "a perfect example of men fighting in an environment with which they were entirely at home and for which they were well trained." From this vision, American fighting men transformed into masters of mountainous warfare and left a legacy felt well beyond the

military apparatus and into modern times. Many of these men played a leading role in the post-war expansion and transformation of the outdoor winter sports industry.

I personally enjoyed reading this book because at the time I was going through cold weather training as a Green Beret with 10th Special Forces Group in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Many of the stories and exploits in *The Winter Army* rang true as I spent three weeks in negative 20-degree weather, experiencing many of the same emotions as the men who were doing the same training 80 years earlier in almost the same location.

However, some readers may not get the same enjoyment out of it as I did. Isserman did not write this book to be like *We Were Soldiers* or *Black Hawk Down*. *The Winter Army* is not a gripping war story where the reader hangs onto every word to absorb the fear and euphoria combat brings. Without this stimulus or physically standing at Camp Hale to see the mountains on which the first men of the 10th Mountain learned to ski, some readers may find the book dry.

Despite this minor flaw, I highly recommend Isserman's *The Winter Army*. If you're a modern day 10th Mountain Soldier, outdoor enthusiast, find yourself on the slopes of Colorado, or in a snow igloo (like I was), I recommend picking up a copy and reading about the "original ski bums," the Soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division.

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