

SPIRIT OF THE MOUNTAINS

BY DEVON O'NEIL



AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK, I THINK ABOUT A PERSON I NEVER MET—a strapping, gleaming-eyed mountain man with a cartoon character’s nickname. Robert “Snuffy” O’Neil was my grandfather, my mom’s dad. He died of a heart attack when she was pregnant with my twin brother, Sean, and me, heartbreakingly close to meeting us, yet destined not to. He was 56.

For most of my life, I knew little about Snuffy except that he was an artist and had long, long ago served in the US Army’s 10th Mountain Division. My mom told us stories from time to time, but I never truly understood what the latter part meant until a chance encounter on top of Vail’s Blue Sky Basin.

It was a bluebird day in March 2006, and I was lounging alone in the sun outside Belle’s Camp when an old, frail man asked if I’d take his photo. I obliged, and he called his three friends over. Each had a small white sticker on the tip of his skis depicting the 10th Mountain Division logo. I immediately knew they were vets.

On a whim, I asked if they knew Snuffy O’Neil. Their jaws dropped. One of them, 87-year-old Andre Benoit, spun around and stared at me. “Snuffy O’Neil, did you say?” I nodded. “Why, I haven’t heard that name since before the war ended.”

I was dumbfounded. Sixty-one years after they’d served together, I’d bumped into Snuffy’s old war buddies out for a day of spring turns! They were the first people I’d met outside my family who knew my grandpa. All of them remembered him fondly and shared what stories they could recall.

“The last time I saw Snuffy, he fell eighty feet off a rock cliff and didn’t even have a scratch on him!” bellowed 91-year-old Nelson Bennett. “He was outgoing, and a good GI buddy. I mean it.”

Earl Clark, who helped capture Riva Ridge from the Germans in 1945, gushed about Snuffy’s cartoons, which ran in the *Blizzard*, the 10th’s internal newspaper. “They had great humor. He took the hardships and made fun out of them for everybody,” Clark said. “You couldn’t look at what he’d done without getting a smile on your face.”

More than their memories, I was captivated by the obvious bond these men shared. Six decades later, their lives still revolved around the mountains—as did mine, and now I better understood why. In the fall of 2002, Sean and I quit our jobs in Washington, DC, sold our cars, loaded up a van with everything we owned, and started driving. Our destination: Portland, Oregon.

Neither of us had ever been to Portland, but we figured it had to be better than the stifling metropolis that was greater >>



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Washington. We were 23 years old, just out of college, untethered to anyone or anything but each other. Heading west felt enchanting, as if someone had sucked the blood from our veins and replaced it with liquid freedom.

Long story short: we never made it to Portland. Our fourth night on the road, we stopped for a twelve-hour respite to visit a friend in Breckenridge. Driving into town, surrounded by 12,000-foot mountains, Sean and I looked at each other and asked, “Why wouldn’t we stay here?” So we did. One night became three; three became a winter; a winter became a decade. I still have never been to Portland.

I often think about that moment and how it changed the course of my life. Why did it seem so obvious to stay? We grew up in the



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Caribbean, not the mountains. I wouldn’t have known what to do on a powder day if Ullr himself had been guiding me.

Now whenever I think about Snuffy, I wish a simple wish: that I could go skiing with him. I have pictures of him on my living room wall, skiing and climbing near his training grounds in Camp Hale, ten miles as the crow flies from where I’ve settled in Breckenridge. My mom believes it’s more than coincidence. She tells me I’m living the life he always dreamed of. And I guess I am, but it still makes me sad that he and I aren’t living it together.

But maybe we are. In a strange way, I like to believe Snuffy’s spirit lives inside me. And when Sean and I stopped for a night in 2002, he reached out and didn’t just touch us—he held us, and kept us where his heart belonged. 🐾