



Searching for Snuffy

A chance meeting on the top of Vail mountain leads a ski bum directly to his past.

By Devon O'Neil

THE ELDERLY MAN, skin wrinkled and dark from years in the high-altitude sun, walked over and stood above me, casting his shadow on my face. "Excuse me," he said, "but would you mind taking our picture?" I didn't want to. I was tired from skiing all morning, and lying in the snow with the sun on my skin was everything I needed right then. Certainly anyone else in the crowd at the top of Vail's Blue Sky Basin would've been capable of taking that picture. For some reason, he chose me.

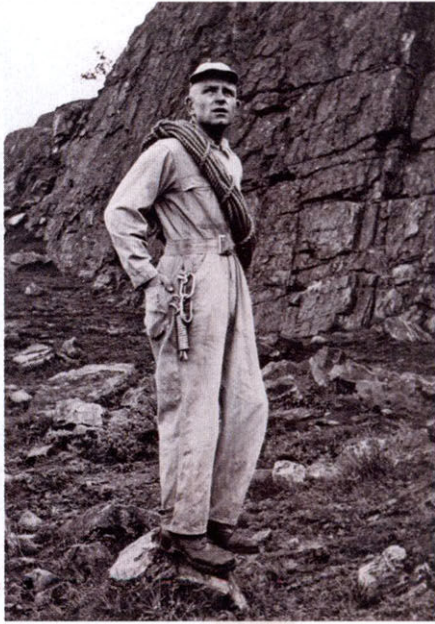
When I obliged, he signaled his three friends to come over and handed me his camera, an old 35mm that seemed a decade past its time. The men looked far too old, too, especially to be skiing way up there. Still, they had the latest equipment and, if they'd gotten this far, some serious mountain know-how.

Then I noticed the telltale small white sticker at the tip of each of their skis: the 10th Mountain Division logo. It was the proud badge of

an elite clan of World War II veterans—the mountain fighters, soldiers on skis. After four years ski bumming up in the Colorado high country, I knew that sticker well. In fact, I had trained myself to look for it. It was the mark of Colorado legends, men to respect. Most importantly for me, though, that sticker might be the key to my past.

I snapped a few photos of the men as they flashed weathered, genuine smiles. We talked about the snow, the day. And before I knew it I was blurting out the same question I'd asked every other 10th vet I've ever met. "Does the name Robert 'Snuffy' O'Neil ring a bell to any of you?" One of the men, who'd already begun to walk away, paused and swung his head around like he'd heard a ghost. "Snuffy O'Neil, did you say?" Before I could answer him, another man repeated the

REMAINS OF THE DAY Nelson Bennett, Earl Clark, and Dick Over, 10th Mountain Division veterans of World War II, with a photo of Snuffy O'Neil.



ALL THAT'S LEFT OF HIM The author's grandfather, Snuffy O'Neil, training for mountain combat at Camp Hale during World War II.

name while looking at the ground. "Snuffy O'Neil ..." He shook his head, collecting his thoughts. "Why, I haven't heard that name since before the war ended." My mind raced as I did the math. Sixty-one years.

ROBERT "SNUFFY" O'NEIL was my grandfather. He died of a heart attack six months before my twin brother and I were born. It devastated our mother. She knew how much two little boys could have gained from growing up with a grandpa like that, a 10th Mountain Division vet and one of the original "mountain men." Perhaps, too, she knew how much Snuffy would have gained from us, since he never had a son of his own.

So, for as long as I remember, I had been on the hunt for more information about the patriarch I never knew but always heard about, especially since I'd made the unexpected move out West to Breckenridge, only 10 miles as the crow flies from the 10th Mountain Division's original base camp. I constantly dropped his name, just in case someone out there might remember him, might have an anecdote, a picture, a punch line, something. Until that day at Vail, I'd never had any luck. These men were my first Snuffy connection. And as it happened, they were in town for a 10th Mountain Division reunion tour through Colorado high country. Not really knowing why at the time, I immediately joined the tour. And as I spent those days with those men I found out more about my grandfather (and myself) than I ever would've believed was lost.

The week started at Ski Cooper, just outside

Leadville. The 10th vets said I'd meet more men there who knew my grandfather; they were right. Immediately, I met a very old, almost skeletal man. I introduced myself and began to explain my mission—but before I'd even finished my sentence, this man, Nelson "Nellie" Bennett, took over. "Snuffy O'Neil?!" he shouted, almost in disbelief. "The last time I saw Snuffy he fell 80 feet off a rock cliff and didn't even have a scratch on him!"

One of the only photographs my brother and I have of our grandfather was taken just before that fall. He has his hemp climbing rope coiled across his shoulder and is standing below the C Street Cliffs at Camp Hale, the settlement between Vail and Leadville where the men of the 10th lived and trained for mountain combat in the European Alps. I ruffled through my things and presented the photo to Bennett, who explained that he had been standing directly above my grandfather when he fell. He stared at the black-and-white image as it brought back a moment in time more than six decades gone. Then he handed it back to me and smiled. "That's Snuffy all right."

Bennett, who was 91, epitomized the 10th's 1,800 known living veterans. After the war ended, he ran the ski patrol for 20 years at Sun Valley. He served as a World Cup alpine racing official for the International Ski Federation. He dates a woman 20 years younger than himself—and, of course, he's still skiing. Bennett told me he and my grandfather were both climbers, and that he respected my grandfather. He also was the first to tell me about Snuffy's art, calling him a "marvelous" cartoonist and explaining that his work used to run in the *Blizzard*, the 10th Mountain Division's internal newspaper. "He was outgoing and a good GI buddy," Bennett concluded. "I mean it."

Another vet, retired Lt. Col. Earl Clark, 87, also brought up my grandfather's cartoons. He said they'd been displayed on the wall of the officer's club at Hale. "They had great humor," said Clark, who was among the 10th ranks in 1945 that famously captured Riva Ridge and Mt. Belvedere—mountain positions the Germans held for nine months. "He took the hardships and made fun out of them for everybody. You couldn't look at what he'd done without getting a smile on your face." Examining that old photo of my grandfather, Clark grinned a boy's grin. "He's just as handsome as all of us were at that time."

But more than just a funny guy, it turns out, my grandfather was a damn good mountaineer, too—something I was proud to hear

from Dick Over, 82, Snuffy's neighbor at Hale. He told me about my grandfather's role in the Mountain Training Group, or MTG, an elite outfit of 40 mountain experts. "The MTG was a very special core group of skiers, rock climbers, and outdoors people," explained Over, who still teaches skiing at Winter Park. "They trained other troops. They tested equipment, they tested systems of climbing, they tested all sorts of things."

A teacher. A comedian. A good friend. Few 10th vets recalled much in the way of Snuffy as a fighter or a soldier. Which was fine by me. I didn't want to think of him that way either. "He's one of the few guys I remember," said Andre Benoit, the camera-wielding skier at Vail. "And there's an awful lot of them I don't remember."

AS FOR SNUFFY, he taught skiing in Aspen after getting out of the service and eventually moved to New England, where he raised two daughters in the house he and my grandmother built with their hands. Growing up, I pictured him almost like a character in one of his cartoons. He had that silly name, and, in his pictures, the hulking, strong body and dimpled smile. But I never knew much else about the man behind that grin.

The 10th Mountain veterans were the original Colorado badasses. After talking to them that week, I realized they have a humility and reservation about their past, too. It's an unspoken authenticity that would be no more obvious if they wore a badge on their forehead. I'd like to think Snuffy was just like them. Modest, humble, hard when he had to be, soft when he could be. A man among legends.

Maybe that helps explain why, on certain days, when the wind is howling and the powder feels like whipped cream, I'm drawn to stand on a ridge and catch a lungful of cold air. Me, the kid who grew up on the deck of a sailboat in the Virgin Islands, who somehow found his way to the Rockies and learned to speak their language. What I had when I came here was a ghost. But what I'm left with is a person. And as I watched those graying men make their stiff yet graceful turns down the mountain in front of me, I saw my grandfather for the first time. It's good to know Snuffy. And it's good to know that, through him, I've begun to know myself. ▲

Devon O'Neil is the sports editor of the Summit Daily News. He lives in Breckenridge, where he's picked up freeheel skiing, just like the 10th Mountain men.