

How the 10th Mountain Division Is Going Back to Its Alpine and Mountain Roots

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The rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, ongoing global conflicts, and the resurgence of conventional warfare remind the observant student of history of light infantry's critical and historical role in alpine operational environments. As America prepares for potential future large-scale combat operations (LSCO), it is vital to recognize the necessity of a versatile, adaptable, and rapidly deployable fighting force that meets the unique challenges posed by diverse mountainous terrains. Mountainous and severely restrictive terrain are the province of light infantry formations, which are combat units inherently centered around people rather than platforms. Controlling severely restrictive terrain requires small unit survivability, autonomy to exercise disciplined initiative, and the cross-country mobility of both combat units and their associated sustainment.

The potential operational environments of a future large-scale conflict necessitate reevaluating and reaffirming the indispensable role of alpine light infantry. Recognizing emerging capability gaps, several generations of 10th Mountain Division senior leaders have championed the potential impact of highly versatile and adaptable forces in a variety of likely conflict zones.

This article will describe potential employment in Finland, Sweden, Norway, the Caucasus, Taiwan, and Korea. These burgeoning use cases for mountain and alpine forces drive a return to the heritage of the 10th Mountain Division. The ability of properly trained light infantry formations to swiftly maneuver, capture, and defend key terrain, and strike enemy vulnerabilities in rear areas, even under harsh conditions, makes them a vital component of the U.S. Army's strategic capabilities. As such, the 10th Mountain Division advocates for prioritizing and investing in the training, equipping, and development of these forces, ensuring that they are ready to respond to a broad range of potential threats and conflicts. The world is unpredictable; a well-trained and well-equipped light infantry force capable of operating in alpine terrain is a powerful deterrent to potential aggressors. By training and equipping light infantry for the likely operational environment of a LSCO fight, the United States reminds potential adversaries that the Nation remains steadfast in its commitment to defend its allies, regardless of conflict location. In a time of growing uncertainty and persistent challenges, the alpine light infantry's role is relevant and more crucial than ever.



10th Mountain Division soldiers from 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, complete tasks like movement up steep terrain, camouflage, and shooting moving targets in a Sarmis joint training exercise on 26 September 2023 in the alpine terrain around Brosov, Romania. (Photo by Spc. Mason Nichols, U.S. Army)

Despite historical precedence, the U.S. Army has not prioritized mountain training since the mid-twentieth century, contributing to gaps in capability. Deterrence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War and the subsequent prolonged counterinsurgency focus of the Global War on Terrorism have impacted any ability to field specialized divisions. As conflict in alpine and arctic regions becomes increasingly likely, the United States must invest in capability development and training to field a division of specialized mountain infantry prepared for a potential LSCO conflict in mountainous terrain.

Emerging threats in Finland, Sweden, Norway, the Caucasus, Taiwan, and Korea may all require mountain light infantry forces to achieve a position of advantage relative to the adversary while avoiding canalized ground lines of communication along roads and bridges. Investment in this capability at scale requires creativity and a novel approach. Unlike the formation

of the 10th Mountain Division in World War II, the Army will not draw from a large civilian population of outdoor enthusiasts with the requisite expertise to fill the ranks of mountain soldiers. Instead, the Army must inculcate mountain skills, culture, and leadership traits in today's volunteers and develop methods to track and assign these specialized soldiers where needed.

Defending Our Allies: Finland, Sweden, and Norway

Given the stated objectives of Russia in Ukraine, an escalatory LSCO fight in neighboring Finland, Sweden, or Norway seems more likely than at any time since 1940. As tensions rise, these northern European countries are increasingly becoming the frontlines of deterrence. Inaction by the United States risks demonstrating weakness, potentially emboldening adversaries. A strong, well-trained, and thoroughly prepared American alpine light infantry serves as a strategic



Soldiers from across the 10th Mountain Division trek through the snow dragging Ahkio sleds 19 January 2024 during the D-Series Winter Challenge on Division Hill, Fort Drum, New York. Soldiers participating in D-Series demonstrated mental and physical fortitude by adapting to and overcoming challenges during events like qualification on multiple critical weapons systems under stress and completing several hands-on tests that validated their knowledge of essential alpine survival skills and unit history. (Photo by Spc. Salvador Castro, U.S. Army)

deterrent, reinforcing the commitment to these long-standing partnerships and preserving the balance of power in the region.

The role of light infantry in LSCO is hotly debated as the Army economizes efforts to transition away from a focus on counterinsurgency fought by a revolving door of identical brigade combat teams (BCT). Historically, light infantry has demonstrated its effectiveness in restrictive terrain by achieving mass where mounted formations are incapable of operating effectively because of lengthening supply lines and confinement to road networks. This was exemplified by the Finnish ski troops during the Winter War (1939–1940).¹ The Finnish tactics exposed Soviet reliance on roads and leveraged Finnish all-terrain winter mobility. By targeting long Soviet columns and destroying them piecemeal, the Finnish troops were able to mitigate the numerical advantage of

Soviet forces and turn the tide of the conflict.² During World War II, the forefathers of the 10th Mountain Division established their reputation by breaking the Gothic Line through mountain infiltration. The hard-won battles at Riva Ridge, Mount Gorgolesco, Mount Belvedere, and Mount della Torraccia compelled Italian surrender.³ Other allies engaged in their own mountain conflict during the war. The Battle of Narvik in Norway is commonly known as a naval engagement, but mountain warfare played a crucial role due to the rugged terrain surrounding strategically important port of Narvik. Because the area is characterized by steep mountains, deep fjords, and harsh weather conditions, conventional military operations were impossible. Both German and Allied forces recognized the importance of Narvik and engaged in fierce mountain warfare to gain control of the area.⁴ Strategic decisions to withdraw from Norway due to

German attacks into Belgium, the Netherlands, and France in 1940 reduced the strategic importance of Norway's iron ore, and turned an impending allied victory into a withdrawal.⁵ Axis powers also engaged in mountain operations during the war. Operation Rentier was a German effort in 1941, following the Winter War of 1940, that aimed to secure critical resources in a mountainous region of Finland.

As America seeks to maintain its longstanding partnerships with Finland, Sweden, and Norway, the need for trained and equipped light infantry in alpine environments becomes paramount. The American Army writ large must prepare for conflict in challenging terrain to press the advantage and maximize enemy vulnerabilities. The demand for specialized mountain infantry capability is not localized to niche locale in Northern Europe.

The Caucasus

The resource-rich Caucasus region has suffered from great power competition for centuries. Home to familiar warzones in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, the region contains a tremendous concentration of strategically important natural resources. Acting as the gateway between Europe and Asia, the region holds vast oil and natural gas reserves. As European nations distance their energy economies

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from fossil fuels, regional powers become increasingly important players in the global energy landscape.⁶ Oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea to European markets traverse the region. Trade with regional partners reduce U.S. and European dependency on global powers that are more antagonistic to Western interests.

The Caucasus experienced near-continuous warfare during the first half of the twentieth century.

The Russians and Turks fought a war to control the region continuously in the mountainous Caucasus borderlands leading up to the Great War. In 1917, following the Russian Revolution, the Caucasus region descended into violent conflict among the Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Chechens, all former subjects of the Russian Empire. In 1918, leaders of the Armenian, Georgian, and Azerbaijani regions established the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, prompting further conflict with Türkiye. Although the Transcaucasian Republic did not survive long, the Turks and Soviets thwarted any bid for autonomy or sovereignty in the Caucasus region. In 1917, the Chechens, Dagestanis, and Ingush people established the sovereign nation of the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus. By 1921, the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus was defeated by Soviet forces and absorbed into the USSR as the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Although short-lived, the conflicts during the interwar period highlighted the role of mountain light infantry. Years later, Adolf Hitler leveraged the 4th German Mountain Division to seize key terrain during the Battle of the Caucasus in 1942. In August of the same year, German elements from the 1st Mountain Division planted a Nazi flag on top of Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe.⁷

The rugged, mountainous terrain of the region suggests that light infantry forces, enabled by high-angle fires and equipped with the latest man-portable information collection (IC) systems, will prove decisive in outmaneuvering the adversary in numerous challenging environments. In terms of both resources and potential allies, the United States must underscore its commitment to stability in the Caucasus region.

Competition in the Pacific: Taiwan and Korea

Taiwan and North Korea are increasingly likely flashpoints for a potential LSCO conflict with an increasingly resource-challenged China challenging the balance of power in the South China Sea. A cursory examination of the region's topography reveals the indispensable role mountain light infantry would play in potential conflicts.

Taiwan is the most densely mountainous island on the planet: two-thirds of the island nation is covered

by tightly packed mountainous terrain towering some twelve thousand feet above sea level.⁸ The breakaway state has long been a diplomatic challenge in the geopolitical landscape as Chinese rhetoric emphasizes the unification of all ethnic Chinese under the communist regime in Beijing. Recent escalations have intensified the potential for a LSCO fight, particularly as Chinese influence operations in Taiwanese politics have failed to produce favorable results. As China continues to assert territorial claims, the “One China” policy’s validity is challenged by the existence of an independent Taiwan. Strategically located on the doorstep of mainland China, and serving as a hub of technological innovation, Taiwan sits at the epicenter of this complex and volatile situation. The island’s defense is not just a matter of national sovereignty; it has significant implications for the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. The United States faces a significant challenge in its commitment to Taiwan’s defense against possible Chinese aggression. Any such conflict could quickly escalate into a large-scale military confrontation across multiple domains. Just getting combat power in a position to defend Taiwan is challenging. Countering potential overt action by China demands a high level of readiness from Taiwanese allies.

While the conflict in Taiwan represents a more deliberate and calculated escalation of great power competition, a resumption of hostilities in the conflict with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea could have little warning. Relations between the west and North Korea have remained tense since the 1953 armistice. Inadvertent escalation toward a LSCO conflict remains a hazard of persistent tensions between North and South Korea, the ongoing pursuit of nuclear weapons, and the unpredictable behavior of the regime. Any minor conflict or misunderstanding could inadvertently escalate into a full-blown military confrontation, given the high military readiness on both sides of the demilitarized zone. The economic significance of South Korea, a global leader in technology, automotive, and other industries, and its proximity to China and Japan, two of the world’s largest economies, make any potential conflict on the Korean Peninsula a global concern. Conflict in Korea has far-reaching implications for the world economy and international security, and previous battles on the peninsula provoke images in the American mind

of light infantry fighting and surviving at altitude in mountainous terrain under harsh winter conditions.

Light Infantry: Responsive

Light infantry forces, with their inherent speed and flexibility, will play an indispensable role in a LSCO conflict. Given the dynamic nature of the global geopolitical landscape, conflicts may emerge in multiple regions with little advanced warning. The ability to rapidly project forces to these areas is critical in countering aggression, defending allies, and maintaining international peace and stability.

Light infantry units are highly mobile and capable of operating in diverse environments. The smaller footprint and minimal logistical requirements of light infantry formations allow for rapid deployment, making them a potent instrument for rapid response and power projection. The formations move quickly to seize and hold key terrain, perform reconnaissance missions, and disrupt enemy operations; they also provide combatant commanders critical time for the deployment of additional forces. Given the unpredictable environment of a potential LSCO fight, the speed, flexibility, and the capacity to adapt to an alpine operational environment are vital. Investing in and nurturing mountain light infantry capabilities is, therefore, a strategic necessity.

A Return to Our Roots: Putting the “Mountain” Back in the 10th Mountain Division

Unlike the outdoor enthusiasts that formed the core of the 10th Mountain Division in World War II, today’s division is not dissimilar to any other division in the Army; it is composed of volunteers of diverse backgrounds and upbringing gathered from across the Nation. No collective knowledge of skiing, snowshoeing, or mountaineering is resident in the formation today. To build a Mountain identity, the 10th Mountain Division has developed an integrated approach through a multiyear campaign. The division will train and maintain combat-ready forces that are focused on light infantry excellence in LSCO, develop soldiers and leaders who embrace the hardship and austerity required to overmatch the enemy in the mountains to win at a moment’s notice, and build formations adept at operating decentralized in any complex operational environment or condition.⁹



Soldiers from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, compete in the Alpine Skills Competition 1–5 October 2023 in locations throughout upstate New York. On the final day of the competition, soldiers performed a rally race consisting of a roughly two-mile run, a Skedco stretcher drag, and a rappel down the 45th Infantry Division Drive hillside cliffs. (Photo by Spc. Kasimir Jackson, U.S. Army)

Veterans played an integral part in establishing the outdoor recreation industry in the United States following the 10th Mountain Division's return from the European theater of operations in World War II.¹⁰ This reciprocal relationship with the historical legacy of the original division forms a vital partnership with the industry that the division is rekindling today. By leveraging the expertise of the National Ski Patrol, local civilian ski and climbing organizations, and the National Outdoor Leadership School, among others, the division is leveraging existing expertise to train a cadre of NCOs and soldiers who in turn proliferate their own expertise across the formation. The scope and scale of this effort encompasses every echelon from individual to company, troop, and battery level.

No change to divisional competencies will be possible without an investment in educating leaders. The cornerstone of individual education efforts is the 10th Mountain Division 1Lt. John A. McCown

Mountain Training Group, which prepares volunteers to attend rigorous courses offered at the nearby U.S. Army Mountain Warfare School in Jericho, Vermont. The divisional school is named after a plank holder of the original 10th Mountain Division who lost his life in the battle of Mount Belvedere in the Apennines.¹¹ Soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division demonstrate proficiency at basic mountaineering tasks before attending the Basic Military Mountaineer and Advanced Military Mountaineer courses at the Mountain Warfare School in Vermont. The division is also exploring partnerships with industry to complement Army schools and promote growth and technical expertise at the individual level.

Individual proficiency creates opportunities to build small-unit proficiency and starts to grow wartime capability. The division's investment in training entire units is made possible by leveraging the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in California and

exploring partnerships with countries that maintain mountain and arctic expertise. In the past eighteen months, the 10th Mountain Division has conducted training at the platoon and company echelon in Finland, Chile, Bulgaria, and Romania, to name a few. Capturing the resident knowledge of international partners informs efforts to further develop mountaineering techniques and procure the best possible equipment to achieve success.

Ultimately, efforts to create a motivated, trained cadre of expertise in the NCO corps will fail without the ability to stabilize trained leaders and soldiers and achieve the mass required in the division to truly have institutional mountaineering knowledge. To retain the best, 10th Mountain Division Command Sgt. Maj. Nema Mobar has garnered support for divisional efforts from the U.S. Army Human Resources Command. Previously unavailable to active component soldiers, the Army now assigns the “E” special skill identifier to those who successfully complete the Army Mountain Warfare School. Using this code, the division can track and retain trained soldiers to continue to grow capability in the formation. Additionally, by permitting soldiers to voluntarily adjust their year-month available to move date, the command can facilitate longer duration of assignment at Fort Drum, New York, to avoid hemorrhaging talent every movement cycle. In time, the 10th Mountain Division will build a cadre of NCO expertise akin to jumpmasters in the airborne community.

Equally important to building the requisite skill is the *will* to become elite mountain infantry among the nearly eighteen thousand soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division. Senior leaders recognize that fostering interest in mountaineering, sometimes called “catching the bug” by outdoor enthusiasts, is critical to sustained success. Toward this end, soldiers at echelon are encouraged to pursue alpine sports recreation. Additionally, commanders at all levels have tailored perennial training events to integrate mountain skills. There are numerous opportunities to integrate complex terrain and long overland movements in the snow with standard annual training events like live-fire exercises and situational training exercises. Supporting this shift in culture is the recognition of the 10th Mountain Division’s history and distinct identity. Connecting with the past is evident in various activities. In 2022

and 2023, the division hosted a screening of the historical documentary *Mission Mount Mangart* during the annual Mountain Fest event where members of the local civilian community are invited onto Fort Drum to celebrate the history and accomplishments of the 10th Mountain Division. Additionally, events like the challenging annual D-Series squad competition where soldiers and leaders of the division test their mettle over a multi-day alpine skills event, and Vail Legacy Days held in Colorado each winter where select members of the division honor the origins of the 10th Mountain Division, provide an opportunity for to connect with the division’s roots. Ultimately, the 10th Mountain Division understands the importance of esprit de corps in establishing a enduring mountain culture.

Without measurable goals, growth would be impossible. The division’s guideposts for success are described in the *10th Mountain Division Campaign Plan*. In his guidance, Maj. Gen. Gregory K. Anderson described a division comprised of “small-units that demonstrate mental and physical toughness by moving 14km within 9.5 hours over snow-covered Level-2 terrain that includes CL4 and CL5 dismounted mobility classifications.”¹² His vision includes formations that “resist environmental effects to fight in non-contiguous terrain, sustain operations for at least 120 hours in temperatures down to -25 degrees Fahrenheit, at 3-6 thousand feet of elevation, and independent of ground lines of communication.”¹³ In support of these formations, the division must create communication architecture capable of “supporting upper-TI [tactical infrastructure] at high altitude, high latitude, and low temperature,” and forge enduring partnerships with allies across the globe.¹⁴ MG Anderson’s goal is for the 10th Mountain Division to “become the proponent for military mountaineering in the U.S. Army and host Mountain and Arctic Warfare symposiums, congresses, and conferences as an internationally recognized hub of the Alpine community.”¹⁵

Piloting the division’s return to alpine and mountain expertise over the last year have been the warriors of the 1BCT. After partnering with units in Chile, Finland, Bulgaria, and Romania, the brigade conducted the first Warrior Alpine Readiness week in October 2023. Key leaders and soldiers from every unit in the 1BCT, 10th Mountain Division, and available volunteers from 2BCT, received specialized mountain

training. Soldiers dedicated countless hours rappelling; learning rope-assisted climbing techniques; developing mountain medical treatment and evacuation tactics, techniques, and procedures; and conducting overland navigation on New York's Adirondack Mountains. The week concluded with a competition pitting squads from each battalion against one another in a half-day event that showcased their proficiency in the skills trained during Warrior Alpine Readiness week. The benefits of investing in training at scale have been evident as several units at the company, troop, and battery levels conducted platoon-level training and exercises involving the construction of fixed ropes, rope bridges, suspension and traverse, rappelling, and basic mobility skills; all training utilized the high-angle mountaineering kits already on the unit military table of organization and equipment.

The U.S. Army is responsible to deploy, fight, and win our Nation's wars by providing ready, prompt, and sustained land dominance across the full spectrum of conflict as part of the joint force.¹⁶ If great powers clash in large-scale combat, the Army will require well-trained and highly motivated light infantry forces.

Threats to destabilize the world order and influence or disrupt our allies while degrading our Nation's influence are on the rise. We will answer the requirement for a highly trained, rapidly deployable force that can operate in complex terrain and is able to fight anytime, anywhere, against any opponent. To provide the U.S. Army with this essential capability and prepare for the next conflict, the 10th Mountain Division will focus its efforts on becoming a team of offensive-minded, self-reliant, innovative, and critically thinking professionals. We will be masters of our craft, confident in our formation, and disciplined because of our commitment to a greater purpose and belief in one another. As standard bearers for the profession of arms, we will be mentally and physically ready to attack and win any challenge or opportunity tonight.¹⁷ ■

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