

Climbing to Victory



Seneca Rocks in Pendleton County was the site of a unique World War II wilderness assault training school for the army during 1943 and '44. These two trainees were photographed near the rocks in June 1944. They are Richard Schoen, at left, and Frank "Lefty" Sadjewski. Photograph courtesy of Richard Schoen.

WWII Assault Training at Seneca Rocks

By Robert C. Whetsell

In the summer of 1943, 32 army officers and enlisted men from the Mountain Training Center at Camp Hale, Colorado, embarked on a memorable journey to the wilds of West Virginia. Their mission was to set up and run the army's only low-altitude assault climbing school, located at the base of Seneca Rocks in Pendleton County and operated as part of the West Virginia Maneuver Area (WVMA).

These GI's were an elite cadre of world-class mountaineers known as the Mountain Training Group (MTG), sometimes called ski troopers or snow soldiers. The 13th Corps of the U.S. Army oversaw the WVMA from headquarters in Elkins. The climbing school at Seneca and a pack-mule transport school in Tucker County were two of several training programs unique to the five-county WVMA. [See "The Mule School: The West Virginia Home Front in World War II," by H.L. Hames; Spring 1991.] The area was selected for its rugged isolation and similarities to terrain found in northern Italy, the expected destination for those engaged in the training. Seneca Rocks was going to war.

For Sergeant Sylvan "Woodie" Waldrip, a 23-year-old climbing instructor, the detail was an eye-opening and life-changing experience. A native of northern California, Woodie documented that time in a 15-page memoir, written in the fall of 1944 while he was stationed in Texas.

It was a sunny July morning when

Seneca Rocks first came into view of the army convoy, Woodie wrote. From their trucks, he and the others sized up their new playground. Most had never been to West Virginia or even heard of Seneca Rocks. This 900-foot blade of Tuscarora sandstone impressed them. Although nearby Champe Rocks and other formations were also used, Seneca Rocks was to be the focus of the program.

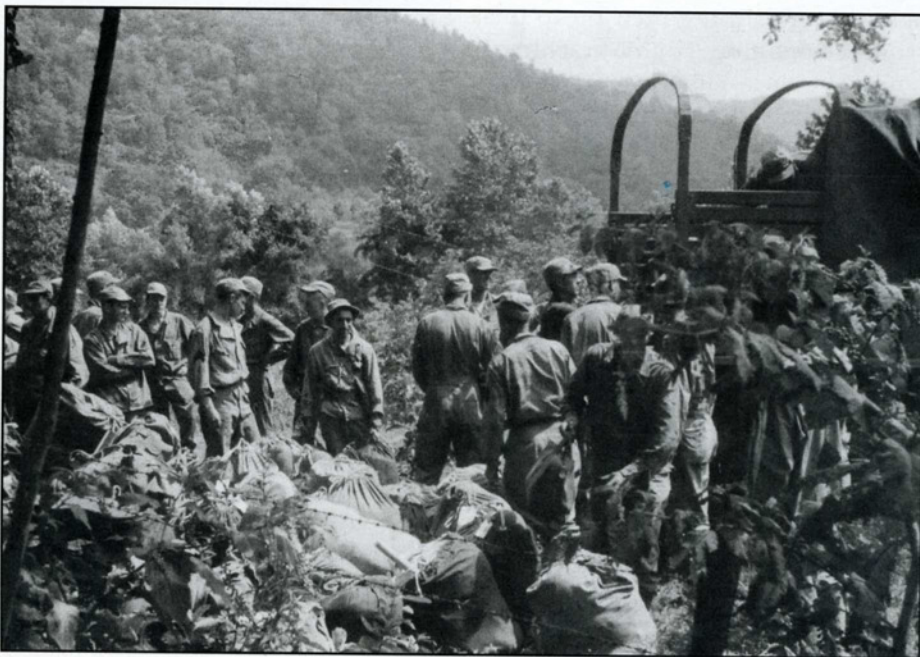
They were driven to their new campsite on the Wilbur Kisamore farm, situated between Champe and Seneca rocks on the banks of the North Fork of the South Branch of the Potomac River. "Upon arrival we found just an empty field," Woodie recalled, "but it wasn't long 'til the peaceful scene had changed into a seething, turbulent mass of cursing and sweating GI's."

Despite the noise from the neighboring pigs that could be heard "rooting and squealing throughout the day," Woodie felt the setting was a piece of heaven.

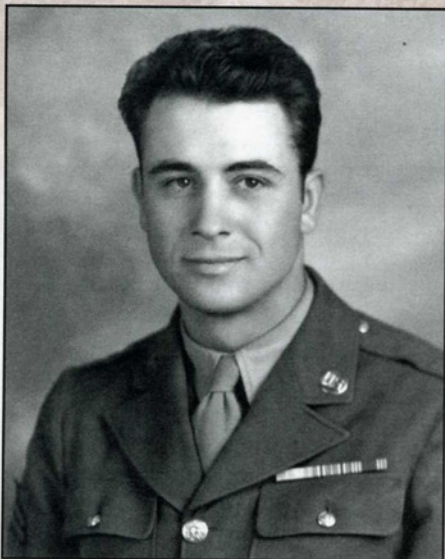
"To our rear was the river, from which we drew our water supply and from which we had many pleasurable afternoons swimming in its refreshing waters. A short ways from the river was a beautiful grove of hardwoods. It was in the shady lane between those trees and the river that we — the instructors — pitched our pyramidal tents."

The rest of the camp, including the mess, orderly, and supply tents, was arranged on one side of the field. The remaining pasture was used as a bivouac area for the students' pup tents.

With camp established, efforts turned to preparing Seneca and Champe rocks for classes. Teams of men armed with axes and saws hacked and cut away sections of dense underbrush that blocked the base of the rocks. Loose stones were rolled off ledges. Afterward, instructors sought to find climbs that required varying degrees of skill for the students.



Members of the elite Mountain Training Group (MTG) arrive at Seneca Rocks in July 1943. Photograph courtesy of Fritz Kramer.



Climbing instructor Sylvan D. "Woodie" Waldrip, prior to his arrival in West Virginia and his promotion to sergeant. Photograph courtesy of Mary Dalen.

For many, West Virginia was an alien place, filled with strange sights and sounds. Woodie described an evening walk to camp from the Mouth of Seneca, the nearest town:

"Under a starlit sky, as we were homeward bound, I turned to Slim [Mabery] and remarked, 'It sounds as though 1,000 bands are playing!' The din was terrific — frogs croaking, bobwhites whistling, owls screeching, and 1,000 other strange and bewildering noises, unlike any I'd ever heard before, were adding their bit to this strange symphony. For the first time, I noticed fireflies — little sparks of flame flittering here and there through the black night. Another enchanting thing brought to my attention that evening was fox fire — old rotten wood that took on a weird phosphorous glow."

Soon, the first contingent of trainees arrived at Seneca. Fritz Kramer, an Austrian-born climber with the MTG, remembers that the students' initial reaction to the sight of Seneca Rocks was one of shock and fright. "They had been told they were going to an assault climbing school — which to them meant climbing over some obstacles," Fritz says. "No word about rocks. When they first saw the rocks and were told they were to climb them, their first reaction was 'We'd rather face a firing squad!'"

The school's 14-day program provided technical instruction on the fundamentals of rock climbing. According to Fritz, the structure of the class was simple: "Each instructor was assigned 10 men, who would be taught the basics of climbing. At the end of the first week, the weakest four were 'washed out.' The remaining six, composing two rope parties of three each, would receive another week of advanced training."

The initial days were used to build the confidence of the soldiers while weeding out those unsuited for climbing. From wooden towers, nicknamed

"corn cribs," instructors taught the use of ropes, knot tying, and belaying — the art of catching a man tied on the end of your rope. As instruction moved to Seneca and Champe rocks, soldiers learned hand and foot holds, rappels, piton use, party climbs, night-climbing techniques, and medical evacuations. Overall, the school proved highly successful in teaching climbing techniques to combat teams, medics, engineers, officers, and enlisted men from five army divisions.

Climbing instructor Wendy Broomhall remembered, "Many had no de-



A soldier prepares to scale Seneca Rocks in August 1943, in full climbing gear. Photograph by A. Aubrey Bodine, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.

sire to climb and were frightened to start with, but after two weeks they would be doing real well." Some instructors couldn't help playing with the healthy fears of their students. "I can remember Bob [Galaher] telling a trainee as he was preparing to go off a ledge on his first rappel, 'Don't worry, the ropes hardly ever break,'" Wendy recalled.

While a few climbing injuries did occur, officials were surprised that more soldiers were not hurt, given the nature of the activity. Aside from a few broken bones, most injuries were limited to rope burns, bruises, and abrasions. The most serious injury to occur involved climbing instructor Rudolph Pundt, who sustained a fractured skull after being struck in the head by a falling rock. After that incident, instructors were required to wear helmet liners for protection — a stripe of white tape on the helmet identified the instructors from the students.

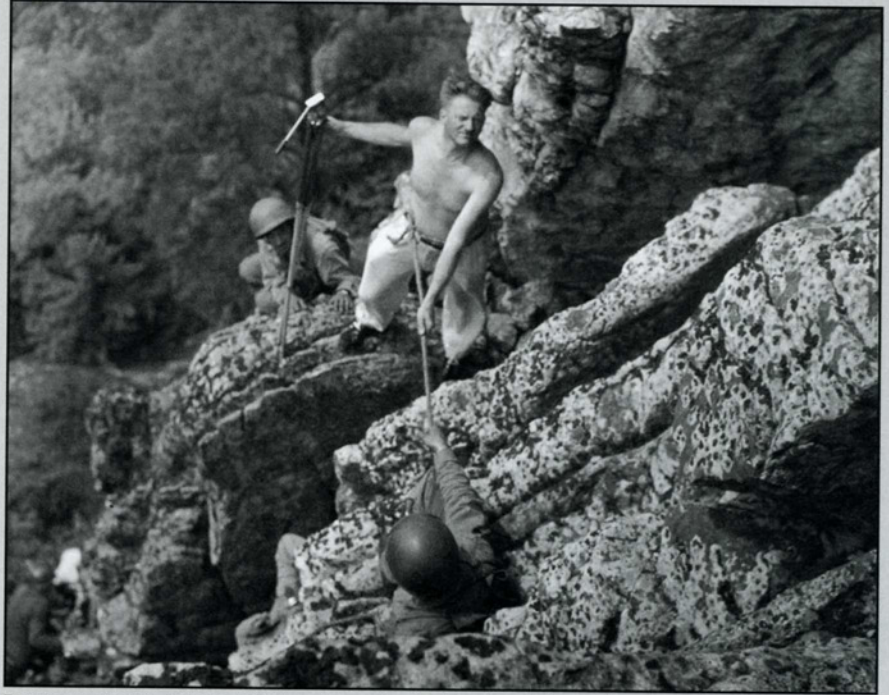
There were many dangers to climbers, but carelessness was the climbers' worst enemy. As Woodie explained, "The boys enjoyed the unusual and dangerous training immensely but were always trying some foolish stunt. One false move could spell death — death, not only to the foolish or careless one, but also to the other men in the party.

"As instructors, our classes were our moral responsibility, and it required constant vigil to see that none of them came to harm. We, ourselves, took lots of chances — foolish, unnecessary chances — while we were teaching. The chances we all took makes me shudder when I stop to think back about it. How so many of us came out unscathed, I'll never know."

Inclement weather was embraced as a way to toughen the climbers. After all, they could not count on perfect weather conditions in battle. In the summer, "the days were depressingly hot and the rocks were almost unbearable," Woodie recalled. "Our clothes would cling to our perspiring bodies, and the perspiration would roll off us in streams."

In winter, instruction continued

Photographer A. Aubrey Bodine and Seneca's Cliff-Scaling Soldiers



Photographer A. Aubrey Bodine, bare-chested and carrying a tripod, scales Seneca Rocks while on assignment for the *Baltimore Sun* in August 1943. Photograph by A. Aubrey Bodine, copyright Jennifer B. Bodine, all rights reserved.

In August 1943, the *Baltimore Sun* dispatched famed photographer A. Aubrey Bodine (1906-1970) to cover a story about the army's unique assault climbing school at Seneca Rocks. Noted for his romantic documentary style of photography and a willingness to go to extremes to get the shot, the 37-year-old photographer joined members of the 28th Infantry Division as they scaled the rocks one hot afternoon.

He must have been quite a sight to the young army volunteers — shirtless, oblivious to danger, and armed with his press camera and lenses. With a rope tightly lashed to his waist and aided by the climbers, he slowly moved up the rock face, no doubt winning the respect of the men he was photographing. Stopping occasionally to capture an image, they made their way to

a prominent pinnacle on the west face of Seneca's south peak known as Humphrey's Head. Once there, Bodine positioned the men for a dramatic series of photos.

In the end, the *Sun* ran two full-page articles featuring the Seneca school. Bodine sought to document the teamwork and spirit of the soldiers as they tested themselves against the seemingly insurmountable challenges hurled at them by Seneca Rocks. He illustrated the life of a mountain soldier: his primitive living conditions, climbing techniques, and unique equipment.

Through his lens, Bodine captured the grandeur of Seneca Rocks and put the observer in the climber's element, where you can almost taste the sweat and feel the breeze in your face, the dirt under your nails, and the blisters on your fingers. —Robert C. Whetsell

Army Pigeons at Seneca Rocks

Three images taken by A. Aubrey Bodine are the only known photographic documentation showing the army's use of messenger pigeons during the West Virginia Maneuvers. The army used portable pigeon lofts across remote regions of the WVMA to communicate with and train troops. Seneca school climbers also received instruction in messenger pigeon handling.

In the fall of 1943, the 281st Signal Pigeon Company set up a loft near the base of Seneca Rocks to introduce the climbers to the winged messengers. The results were mixed. Most climbers found the unwieldy wooden carriers awkward when positioned on their backs. The climbers also complained the extra weight affected their balance and rubbed their backs raw. After a few close calls, instructors resorted to haul-

ing the carriers up the rocks on ropes.

During these exercises, messages were placed in tiny plastic tubes and strapped to the birds' leg. Two birds, each carrying the same message, were released from a portable, two-bird carrier. This improved the odds the message would get through, as some birds became lost or fell victim to menacing hawks.

In the event of accidents, pigeons were one of the few ways climbers could communicate with the base and medics' first-aid station. On one occasion, a messenger pigeon enabled medical personnel to quickly come to the aide of a climber who had fractured a hip. Today, climbers occasionally encounter roosting pigeons on ascents of Seneca — perhaps descendants of errant army pigeons. —Robert C. Whetsell

without pause. Fritz Kramer adds, "Hands got very cold, and you had to stop whenever you could to warm them up a bit. Even worse, the rocks became ice covered and very slick. Fortunately, these conditions didn't last long."

Snakes were another hazard, and fantastic stories abound concerning soldiers and rattlesnakes. The most common form of this story finds a soldier falling into a rattlesnake den where he is bitten to death. Death tolls in these stories range from one to three with as many as 17 injured, though there were actually no confirmed deaths to soldiers as a result of snakebite.

While soldiers from divisions training in the region were not given furloughs, those units stationed in support of the maneuver operation were granted passes. At Seneca, "down time" between classes provided an opportunity for instructors to mingle with the locals. As MTG member Dick Wellington explained, "We instructors had 'Class A' passes that allowed us to go to any of the towns whenever we were off duty, and we took full advantage of them."

In rural areas, most encounters with soldiers occurred by chance as the GI's crossed farms. Commonly, the soldiers would be offered spring water, coffee, homemade pies, or bread. In return, the farmer would be repaid with a broad smile, a "thank you," and whatever money the soldier had on hand. If there were children, coins and candy bars would be slipped into their small hands. These simple gestures were the going rate of exchange between the farmers and "their boys."

Bill Craft, a member of 35th Infantry Division, fondly recalls the mountain women who baked fruit pies for them: "Sitting around a campfire with a warm cup of coffee and eating one of those warm, delicious, fresh pies was a real treat. Those farm ladies really [knew] how to bake."

Early on, there was an effort to "educate" soldiers about the ways and culture of West Virginians. A mimeographed pamphlet titled



Soldiers release a messenger pigeon from Humphrey's Head, atop Seneca Rocks, in August 1943. Photograph by A. Aubrey Bodine, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.



These wooden towers, nicknamed "corn cribs," offered new trainees their first lessons in climbing technique: Photograph courtesy of Norm Lindhjem.

"Mountain Lore" was distributed to incoming troops by WVMA headquarters. However, the colorful interpretations of mountaineers only fueled the soldiers' imaginations. Consider the following: "...Walking is still the principle means of travel, but horseback riding is common, and it is not unusual for the stranger to be startled by a bearded giant suddenly emerging from a dense thicket with

a long-barreled rifle in the crook of his arm, only to disappear as suddenly as he came, over a trail scarcely visible to the untrained eye. ..."

"It was with mingled feelings of dread and expectation that I went to West Virginia," Woodie wrote, noting that stories had filtered through the men about how "back-woods" and "uneducated" the people were and how "outmoded" everything was.

Upon Woodie's arrival in Elkins, however, those stereotypes were shattered. His apprehension melted away as he found the town "much like any other I'd ever been in. The same stores, same window displays, advertisements, signs — there was no difference! Another amazing discov-

Across the maneuver area, families and whole towns opened their homes and hearts to the soldiers.

ery was to find that all of the people wore shoes. In fact, they dressed not unlike the folks at home — they were clean, hardworking citizens. ...Where was the West Virginia I had heard such slandering tales about?"

Across the maneuver area, families and whole towns opened their homes and hearts to the soldiers. At Franklin, one evening, Woodie and another instructor were given a room at "the

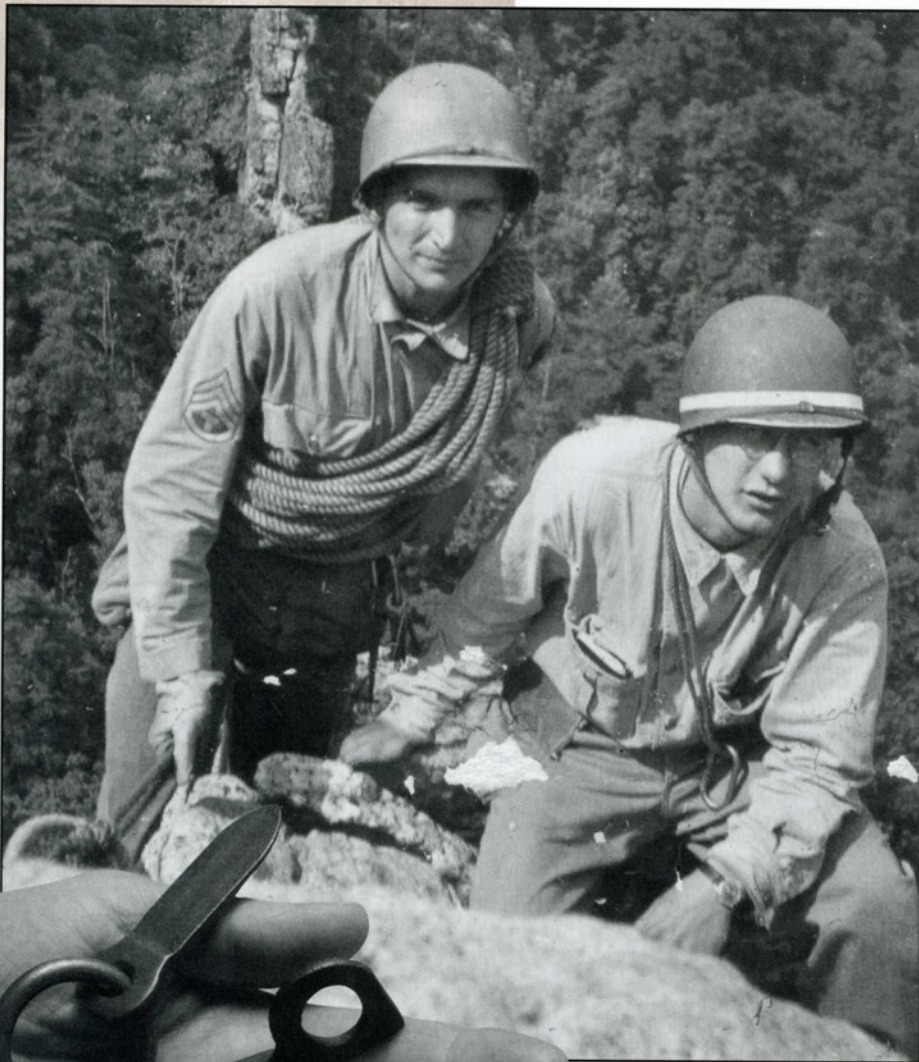
Browns'" for the night. As it turned out, recalled Woodie, "the Browns' proved to be the funeral home."

The following morning, the instructors were invited to a Sunday picnic outside of Franklin. Woodie remembered it as a "jolly and festive event," where "it seemed as though

the townspeople had bared their cupboards for the affair. The reunion grounds echoed with joy-

ous laughter, shouts, and singing voices. The tables were laden with chicken, cakes, preserves, olives, pickles, pies, salads, melons, drinks — everything imaginable. We gorged ourselves."

The soldiers reciprocated by providing entertainment. Army bands gave concerts while soldiers played local teams in sporting events. Most notable was the army show given the



Instructors, identified by a white stripe on their helmet, trained between 10 and 14 soldiers during each two-week session at Seneca Rocks. Here, an unidentified instructor is photographed with 95th Infantry Division climbing student Lefty Sadjewski in June 1944. Photograph courtesy of Richard Schoen.

Pitons, such as these, were an essential piece of hardware for the cliff-scaling soldiers. It is estimated that as many as 75,000 of these pitons were driven into the face of Seneca Rocks during the WWII army maneuvers. Photograph by Michael Keller.

evening of September 17, 1943, at the Tri-County Fair in Petersburg. Soldiers performed comedy skits, sham battles, close-order drills, and pigeon and climbing demonstrations. A singing quintet composed of instructors from the Seneca school stole the show. Of the evening, the Grant County Press reported, "with nice blending of voices and a varied repertoire, the snow soldiers left nothing undone in their efforts to please the audience."

According to soldier and performer Dick Wellington, "I must admit that we were pretty good. We had many invitations to sing at local Rotary, Elk, Kiwanis, and other clubs throughout the area and gratefully accepted them, although our only recompense was a good Southern meal and a drink of applejack whiskey out of a mason jar in the kitchen, and the warmth and friendship of the groups we entertained. I cannot imagine any area where servicemen were welcomed any more warmly than we were."

The soldiers' interactions with area families often led to dating and even

marriages to local women. During the first months of the maneuvers, marriage rates soared in the counties where soldiers were stationed. In Randolph County, headquarters for the maneuvers, marriages doubled and the number of divorces increased.

In Franklin, love was in the air for Mary "Sugar" Dyer. On her breaks from Madison College in Harrisonburg, Virginia, she and Woodie Waldrip began dating. Mary, who still makes her home in Franklin, remembers first seeing Woodie one evening at a popular nightspot known as the Hill Top, located outside Petersburg. Although they never danced that night, she admits that she was attracted to him and his uniform. "He was tall, dark, and handsome and a good dancer," she recalls, adding, "I knew he was a ski trooper because his uniform, like those of all of the climbing instructors, was different from ordinary soldiers. They also wore a unique hat that was different, too. They were very handsome and exciting individuals."

It wasn't long before Woodie had captured her heart and asked her to marry him. On June 20, 1944, Woodie and Mary exchanged vows during a simple Presbyterian service in Franklin. After a short honeymoon, the war crowded back into their new life together.

The maneuvers came to a close on July 1, 1944. Woodie and the other men of the MTG were sent to Camp Swift in Texas to join the newly created 10th Mountain Division. That winter, Woodie and the 10th were sent to Italy. Like so many wartime brides, Mary was left at home; she continued to pursue her education degree.

Writing to his parents, instructor Norm Lindhjem commented, "Everyone hates to leave West Virginia as the people have surely been nice to us all and treated us grand." He added, "It was almost like a home."

Of the estimated 100,000 troops believed to have trained in the WVMA, thousands passed through the Seneca school. Once trained and returned to their outfits, these former students aided climbing instruction during large regimental training scenarios within the WVMA.

FREE ARMY SHOW

PETERSBURG
FAIR GROUNDS

FRIDAY, SEPT. 17
Eight O'clock

SHAM BATTLE • BAYONET FIGHTS
CLOSE ORDER DRILLS
CLIMBING DEMONSTRATIONS
MANY OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Handbill for program
presented by soldiers in Petersburg on
September 17, 1943, courtesy of Norm Lindhjem.

Today, the climbing routes the soldiers blazed and the names they gave to them are lost to history. Climbers still come across rusting pitons—some of the estimated 75,000 pitons driven there by soldiers. Each is a touchstone, a reminder to successive generations of the determination, courage, and sacrifice of the soldiers who scaled Seneca's heights.

Participants of the maneuvers will never forget the kindness shown them by the people of West Virginia. Others, like Woodie Waldrip, never returned from war. Mary proudly retains her only photo of Woodie and the Silver Star she received after his death on April 19, 1945, less than a month before the German surrender in Europe. But it is that 15-page "love story" that is Mary's most personal and cherished item from Woodie, sent to his bride on the eve of his deployment overseas to an uncertain destiny.

In a happy twist of fate, during a brief visit to Montana some years later, Mary stopped to see old

friend and former Seneca climbing instructor Ole Dalen. A remarkable man, Ole had returned home from the war and, despite the loss of his right arm, resumed his job as a ski instructor. What started as a brief two-hour visit eventually grew into a 45-year marriage, with the couple returning to Franklin to teach, farm, and raise two children: John and Andrea. Ole's passing in 1992 has left Mary Dalen with a lifetime of memories and grandchildren.

Today, Woodie rests in the Golden Gate National Cemetery, not far from his boyhood home in California. His legacy, and that of his fellow climbers, lives on through his writings and the memories of those able to recall Seneca's cliff-scaling soldiers. 🍁

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Mary Dalen of Franklin has fond memories of the climbing school. In 1944, she wed instructor Woodie Waldrip, who was killed in action in Europe in 1945. She later married former instructor Ole Dalen. She and Ole lived in Franklin until his death in 1992. Mary is shown here with Woodie's Silver Star and Ole's Bronze Star and Purple Heart. Photograph by Michael Keller.

West Virginia Maneuver Area

By Donald L. Rice

An official news release from Washington on June 23, 1943, announced that army maneuvers would commence in Randolph and four adjacent counties to familiarize army units with "low mountain" and rough-terrain operations under the command of the 13th Army Corps. Elkins was selected as the headquarters for the operations, which were to be conducted in the five-county area on both national forest and private lands.

Elkins and surrounding communities soon observed the movement of troops and equipment, with the arrival of truck convoys and special trains. Within a few weeks, 10,000 troops were living in tent cities within what had been vacant fields in Elkins and outlying communities. By early 1944, about 16,000 soldiers were being trained every eight weeks

in terrain that had been selected due to its resemblance to European topography, particularly to parts of Italy.

The streets of Elkins were often thronged with soldiers. Local people said it was like Forest Festival days every time the masses of soldiers descended upon the town.

Service units, including a signal battalion, a quartermaster detachment, military police, a special services company, engineers, ordnance, and other support elements, were stationed in or near Elkins. Stuart's Park became the site of an army evacuation hospital. A transportation unit, consisting primarily of black soldiers, was encamped in the vicinity of what is now the Southgate and Riverview sections of Elkins. An army station hospital, consisting of seven frame buildings, was erected

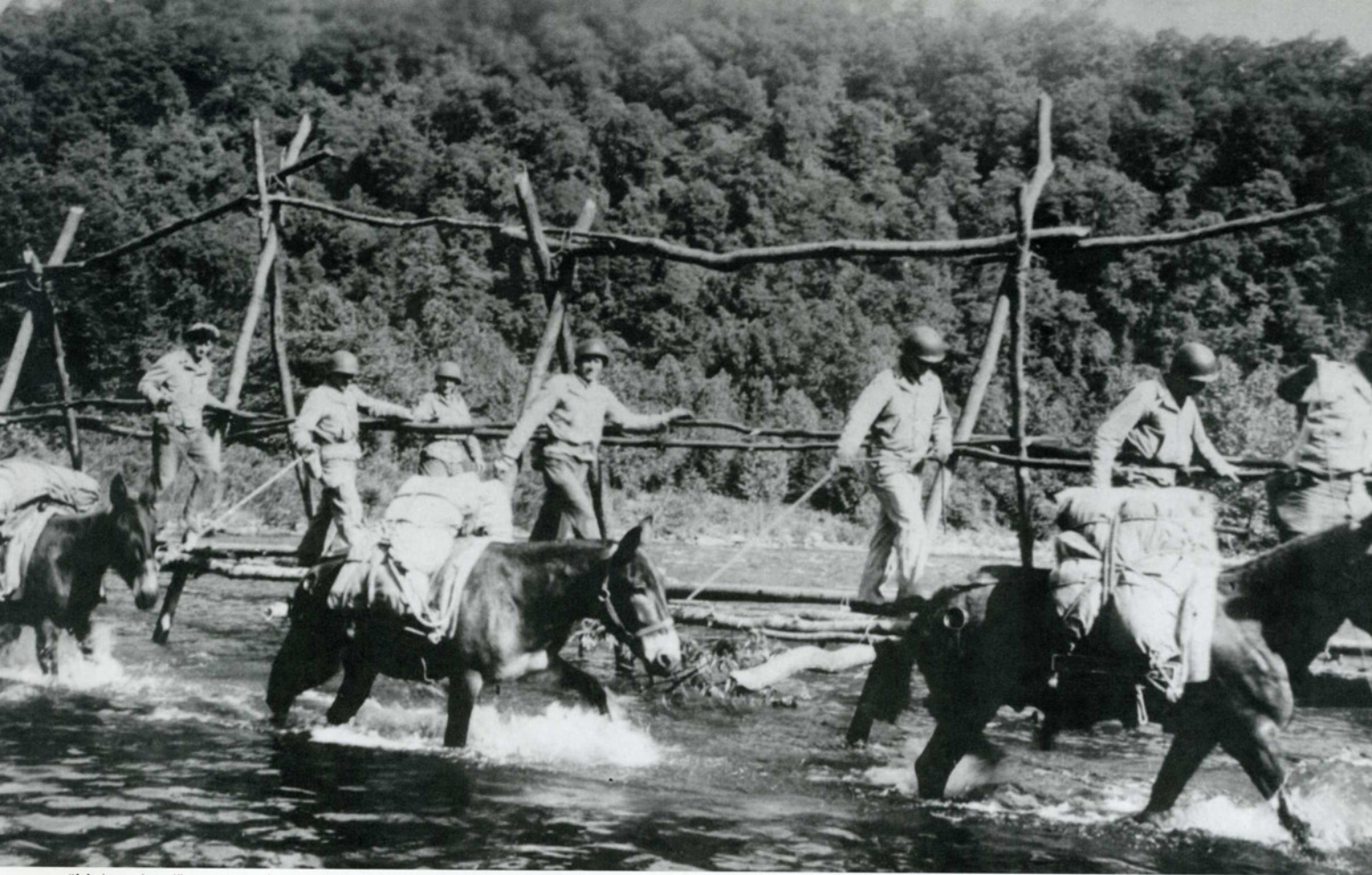
near the Davis Memorial Hospital on the south side of German Avenue.

A signal corps battalion established communications throughout the widespread maneuver area by the use of telephones, telegraphy, teletype, radios, and a carrier pigeon platoon. The pigeons were released on occasion near Alpena and returned to their lofts in the grove at Weese Park near Elkins. Unfortunately, our West Virginia hawks developed a craving for army pigeons, and their depredations soon reduced the carrier pigeon population to a small number.

An army special services company stationed in Elkins provided entertainment and recreation for the soldiers during their off-duty hours. The local citizens were welcomed to the many performances at the YMCA and at Elkins High School. A special program on November 15,



The West Virginia Maneuver Area (WVMA) was a vast, five-county training ground used by the army during World War II to train soldiers in low-altitude mountain operations. Here, soldiers scale Blackwater Canyon in Tucker County. Photograph courtesy of the Army Corps of Engineers.



"Mule school" was one facet of the WVMA training program. Here, soldiers use a primitive footbridge to lead pack mules across a river. Photographer and date unknown.

1943, at the high school featured the first live radio show to be broadcast from Elkins.

By November 1943, the quartermaster unit had the job of procuring and distributing up to 25 tons of food per day in the maneuver area.

Artillery units, utilizing a 60,000-acre preserve for 105mm and 155mm howitzers, engaged in practice firing in the Dolly Sods and Canaan Valley areas. Notices were placed in the local newspaper to forewarn hunters and other citizens of the dangers of being in or near the impact zones during scheduled exercises.

Climbing was taught at Seneca Rocks and Blackwater Canyon, while improvised ridge crossings were made on Blackwater and Dry Fork rivers and at other sites in the five-country area. In July 1943, a detachment from Camp Hale, Colorado, arrived to teach assault climbing. This detachment organized a high-angle rock and assault climbing school at Seneca Rocks. An average of 180 men and officers went through the course every two weeks,

assaulting the sheer and crumbling faces of these crags. Training called for everything from easy rock scrambling to extreme tension work with pitons. Particular stress was laid on the rigging and use of assault ropes and pulleys. Each group made two tactical night climbs on unfamiliar rocks.

Selected individuals representing units throughout the army were trained in rock climbing in order for each organization to have trained climbers for use as observers for artillery and infantry and to emplace infantry weapons in commanding positions. Qualified snipers and scouts were trained to get into difficult positions and also, by means of fixed ropes and artificial aids, to prepare routes for regular troops over terrain that ordinarily would be impassable.

From July 1943 through June 1944, over 100,000 men gained invaluable training in the West Virginia mountains, which prepared them for combat overseas. These men were

subsequently assigned to many fronts throughout the European Theater of Operations. One unit that trained here and served with distinction in Europe was the 94th Signal Battalion. The 94th saw action during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 and participated in the capture and crossing of the Remagen bridge in March 1945.

Like other war efforts, the West Virginia Maneuver Area was a transient operation that left few permanent indications of its passing. Still its impact was considerable, if temporary. The arrival of the army had a significant effect on the local economy as business boomed at hotels and restaurants, and transformed the area into what some contemporary observers called an "old maid's heaven." ❁

This article originally appeared in our Summer 1991 issue. —ed.

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