

Camp Hale Story - Wes Carlson

Introduction

In 1942, the US Army began the construction of a large Army training facility at Pando, Colorado, located in the Sawatch Range at an elevation of 9,250 feet, between Minturn and Leadville, CO, adjacent to US Highway 24. The training facility became known as Camp Hale and eventually housed over 16,000 soldiers. Camp Hale was chosen as it was to become a training facility for mountain combat troops (later known as the 10th Mountain Division) for the US Army in WWII, and the area was in the mountains similar to what the soldiers might experience in the Alps of Europe. The training facility was constructed on some private land acquired by the US Government, but some of the facilities were on US Forest Service land. Extensive cooperation was required by the US Forest Service throughout the construction and operation of the camp and adjacent facilities. The camp occupied over 5,000 acres and was a city in itself. The Camp Site is located in what is now the White River NF.

In 2012, at the US Forest Service National Retiree's Reunion, a tour of the Camp Hale area was arranged. When the group who had signed up for the tour arrived at the office location where the tour was to start, it was announced that we would not be able to go to the Camp Hale site due to logistical issues with the transportation. One retiree, who had signed up for the tour, was very unhappy, and announced that if we couldn't go to Camp Hale he would like to return to the hotel in Vail. He got off the Unimog and went into the office where the tour guides were discussing what to do. After a brief time in the office, he came out and asked us to all vote on what we should do. Of course, we all voted to go to Camp Hale. We did have to change to a bus part way there due to a breakdown of the Unimog.

When we arrived at the Camp Hale site, the retiree who complained about the tour change announced that he had been in the Army at Camp Hale, and he ended up giving the tour in exceptional detail. Of course, the group was all in awe to have someone on our tour who had actually spent time at Camp Hale.

This fall when my wife, Mary, and I went to Vail, we stopped at the Camp Hale site and again discussed how much of an impact the tour has had on us and how many times we have told the story to our friends.

The person who insisted that we tour the Camp Hale site was Forest Service Retiree, Wes Carlson, a Colorado Native, and this is his story.

Thank you to Tom Thompson and Johnny Hodges for assisting me in tracking down Mr. Carlson, who is now 98 years old and lives in Ogden, Utah.

- Bob Sieger, Durango, CO



Wes Carlson at the Camp Hale Site - 2012 Forest Service Reunion

WES' JOURNEY

April 15, 1922, I was born on a farm near Eaton, Colorado. My early years were spent, as a young farm boy does, getting educated with self-inflicted experiences and more formally in small rural schools. In 1937 we were living on a farm west of Greeley when Dad's health required a change. He sold the farm and my mother, dad and me moved to Long Beach, California. My only sibling was a brother 4 years older, who was out on his own and did not go with us. Dad put his carpenter skills to work and was readily employed. I attended my second year of high school at Woodrow Wilson high school in Long Beach.

Late July, 1938, dad decided he was healthy enough to head back to Colorado, so we packed up and headed east on Highway 40. On into August we were stopping often exercising our fly rods on likely-looking streams. In Steamboat Springs we learned of a new dam being built

south of Kremmling so we headed that direction looking for a more permanent base. Over time the folks ended up renting a building at Slate Creek, 14 miles north of Dillon along the Blue River. Attached was a little store with a gas pump out front. For years Mom ran the store while Dad worked at Green Mountain Dam. The interesting thing about all this was that directly across the road was the U S Forest Service Slate Creek Ranger Station.

Ranger Brandborg and his wife were friendly folks and I made it a point to get acquainted. That fall and winter I spent finishing high school in Greeley. Returning to Slate Creek, 1939, I was immediately hired for my first job with the Forest Service maintaining trails on the Slate Creek Ranger District. Problem was, the Forest Service required that I have a pack horse. I managed to buy a suitable horse from Mr. Marshal, a rancher a few miles away. That fall when I started college at Fort Collins, Mr. Marshal bought the horse back. That relationship lasted all through college - - spring time I bought the horse. Fall, Mr. Marshal bought the horse. The Forest Service employed me every summer supervising trail crew or other ranger district work which made it financially possible for me to finish four years of college with a Degree in Forestry.

1943 AND CAMP HALE

Actually, I had a preview of Camp Hale one time in 1942 when I delivered Dad to his carpenter job building barracks there. Mom needed the car back at Slate Creek while dad bunked at Hale.

1943 brought life-changing events to my journey:

1. I finished college.
2. I got into the army.
3. I got married.

During my final semester at Colorado A&M I kept an eye on my back-trail because, coming from Summit County with a small population the draft board was looking for any warm body. An army recruiter showed up on campus and told me he could guarantee my graduation if I signed up for army reserve. I immediately signed the form. One week after graduation I reported for duty at Fort Lewis in Denver and immediately submitted my application with three recommendations (one from a forest ranger, one from my college gymnastics coach, and one from a rancher) for assignment to the Mountain Division. At that time it was pretty much a volunteer outfit, but soon had to take draftees to get up to division strength. With my 2 years of college field artillery ROTC training I shipped out to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for introduction to horse-drawn artillery. In early August the battery lieutenant called me into his office and said, "I don't know what kind of pull you have, but you are being transferred immediately to Camp Hale, Colorado". So there I was, close to home plunked down in semi-familiar mountain terrain.

Camp Hale was built at Pando, Colorado (a stop on the RG&W RR) in a valley at about 8,500 feet elevation. That valley, with increasing war-time railroad and highway traffic plus hundreds of coal-heated barracks and other buildings became a smog trap for all to breath. It cleared out only when a strong storm or wind came through. Almost everything we did -- marches, field exercises, bivouacs, etc. was uphill from there, often with maneuvers well over 10,000 feet elevation.

When I arrived in August much organization and assignments were underway, but not final. I was assigned to "A" BATTERY, 604 FIELD ARTILLERY BATTALION and settled into a spot in the barrack and got acquainted with many of the men I would work with to the end of the war. My college education was more than most of the guys. So we all learned how to keep in step on a march and other neat things that

came handy along the way. Mountain artillery is different from other artillery in size and mode of transportation. We had 75mm howitzers that broke down into pieces for transport on pack mules using special pack saddles. All this required special training, both for the men and the mules. One mule carried the heavy breach block, another carried the wheels, and so-on until half a dozen mules were lined up to carry the disassembled gun. When we were on a field mission one day I asked the first sergeant for an extended pass at Christmas time so I could get married. He said "That aint gonna happen". The lieutenant, however later, allowed as how it could be worked out. Back in camp I got in touch with Dorthy (correct spelling), my fiancé, from a phone booth to work out details. Dorthy was in college at Colorado A&M in Fort Collins. She was a rancher's daughter from Craig. The wedding ceremony was held in one of Dorthy's friend's house in Craig. In attendance was the Baptist preacher, Dorthy's parents and her friend, my parents, and two others. After a brief reception Dorthy and I took off in my parent's car (neither Dorthy nor I had a car) for Slate Creek and spent the rest of the week-long honeymoon exploring country around the Durango area. Back in camp and Dorthy in Fort Collins without a car we had a dilemma trying to take advantage of weekend passes. Busses, with all the connections, were too slow and expensive. Turned out I was rescued by a couple of officers from 616 Field Artillery Battalion. They were both forestry graduates with wives in Fort Collins. One was a classmate of mine. To solve the problem that they could depart camp before my pass was active, they put me in the trunk of their car past the guards at the gate and a few miles up the road where they stopped and let me out of the trunk. Coming back to camp was not a problem because my pass was good past the time the officers needed to be back. REAL FRIENDS. This arrangement worked a few times.

A NEW DIVISION The US Army had never had a Mountain Division, so a lot of the equipment we used was experimental

and in various stages of testing. For example, the WEASEL. It was a track (instead of wheels) vehicle, painted white, built by Studebaker Company for transporting 3 or 4 people rapidly over deep snow. Our first sergeant was using one for recon on a steep slope when it flipped sideway, throwing him out, rolling over and killing him. I was selected as one of three to fire a rifle salute over his coffin as his body was loaded on the train at Leadville for shipment home. The weasel was used around Hale, but I never did see one used militarily anywhere else. I had the privilege of using one after the war for TSI work on the Medicine Bow NF.

SLEEPING BAGS were essential for keeping the body warm at night. First we had kapok bags which did not do the job. On bivouac at minus 30 degrees led to development of the down filled mummy bag and then an outer and smaller inner bag. The trick to using the double bag was to first open up and lay the larger one on the ground. Then insert the smaller one with its short zipper open. Crawl into the small one, reach out and zip up the outer bag, then close the short zipper being sure to have the zipper end right at my chin for later reference. Problem was I was claustrophobic and if I heard a threatening noise during the night I'd reach up to my chin to open the zipper, but couldn't find it because I'd rolled around in my sleep. I was stronger in those days and immediately expanded my arms, etc until something broke and gave me room to get out. Usually that resulted in a million tiny down feathers filling the air. The supply sergeant was always nice about replacing my inner bag.

SMALL TENTS. These were two-man tents so we would carefully select a partner and divide the weight of tent, stakes, fly, floor and other accessories needed to have a happy home. Actually, it worked out pretty well with two men helping each-other when setting up or taking down camp. On one exercise in January we headed out of Hale

easterly, up over the 10,500 foot divide with all the mules in 4 feet of snow, and down the east side. Set up camp within a quarter mile of the highway which was a graveled road with little traffic. It is now I-70 with unending traffic. The second evening I told my tent-partner I needed a change of scenery , but would return early in the morning. I grabbed a flashlight and walked down to the highway. First car that came along, picked me up and dropped me at Dillon. Caught a ride to Slate Creek, surprised the folks, had a good meal and slept several hours in a bed. Next morning Dad took me to my escape point and I walked up the hill to my tent in time for breakfast. Of course my pack was enhanced with lots of goodies from home which I shared with my partner.

MY JOB. My whole military career was associated with Field Artillery, working with horses and mules early on until I was promoted to Tech 4 (same rank as first sergeant) to run Fire Direction Center for Battery A. That entailed helping to get the guns properly positioned and aimed in the general direction of the enemy. Then calculating the changes needed on the guns, both vertically and horizontally, to actually hit the target. Those changes were made, based on what the forward observer (FO) reported to me in yards how far each shot missed the target --right, left, over, under. My work was mostly done on the best contour maps available using slide rules, protractors, and other drafting tools. My contact with the FO was by telephone with wires strung between, over hill and dale, maybe a mile distance, more or less. This continued all through training, combat in Italy, and until the end of the war.

AFTER CAMP HALE

Following the very tough training at Hale, all through the winter and spring of 1943-44, just when we could see patches of bare ground and a few flowers poking through, the 10TH MOUNTAIN DIVISION was

transferred to Camp Swift, Texas. From 8,500 feet to a few hundred feet elevation. From seeing a few ground squirrels at Hale to encountering a great variety of critters large and small. Snakes, spiders, chiggers, armadillos, etc. We still had the mules, but one night a long picket line was broken which allowed dozens (I really don't know how many) of mules to head out into the country and scatter. Several local farmers were enriched with new mules. Our small artillery observation planes were employed to spot strays. Telephone calls from farmers reported some. I believe most, but not all, mules were retrieved in this very strange roundup.

To get from Hale to Texas, I was authorized to use my personal car. Dorothy and I had acquired a 1939 Ford which we loaded up and headed south. With all the windows open, somewhere around Lubbock, a cross wind sucked all our ration stamps out and blew them across the highway. Fortunately, the fence beyond was choked with Russian thistles which trapped most of the stamps. In the strong winds we retrieved about 90 per cent of the stamps which Dorothy would need. While I was at Camp Swift she lived in an apartment in Austin about 15 or 20 miles away. She promptly got a job and we could use the car to travel back and forth.

Training without mountains or snow was a totally new experience for the troops. Lots of complaints and lots of speculation about our ultimate destination until December when I headed for Virginia to get on a troop ship, and Dorothy drove the car back to Colorado.

Landing in Naples, Italy started a whole new and different kind of experience. After a few days around Naples seeing the historical sites and climbing the slope of Mount Vesuvius I boarded an ancient wood boat headed for Leghorn. Mules in the lower deck or hold. Men on the upper deck. That was the last time I saw the mules. Continued

overland to Florence where we totally reorganized. We became motorized with 105 mm guns for the rest of the Italian campaign. The 10th Mountain Division was assigned the job of kicking the entrenched Germans out of the Apennine Mountains, which we did, then raced across the Po River and Valley to the base of the Alps at Lake Garda. Resistance all the way. No further road access north until all the tunnels along both sides of Lake Garda had been re-opened. The Germans had blasted every one full of rocks and debris. As an expedient I travelled the length of Lake Garda (along with 6 or 8 other men) to Torbolli in a DUC to set up an advance fire direction base. As we came out of the water the town immediately ahead was being heavily shelled by the Germans, but the shelling stopped shortly after we commandeered a house for our headquarters. After the tunnels were opened and the troops could get through we moved further into the Alps on the way to Brenner Pass. That's where we were when the war in Europe ended May 8, 1944. Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia was insistent on acquiring more land so we were reassigned to Udine on the Yugoslav border to hold him in check.

Not much happened until we again boarded troop ships bound for the USA along in August, headed eventually for Japan. Back to Virginia and a troop train to Denver where I anticipated a long period of leave to get re-acquainted with my wife. Just as the train pulled into Denver the war with Japan was declared ended. Denver came apart at the seams. We couldn't even get a meal at a restaurant. Fortunately, Dorothy had driven to Denver the day before and acquired a nice hotel room.

After a 30 day furlough I returned to Colorado Springs where the 10th had set up headquarters, waiting for discharge, which took some time. At the time of my discharge no Forest Service jobs

were available so I took a job with a coal mine at Yampa. Dorothy was employed as Home Demonstration Agent for Routt County, living at Steamboat Springs. I decided to work on a masters degree through the GI Bill, so we moved back to Fort Collins and enrolled at Colorado A&M. Before I could finish that program the Forest Service opened a JF (junior forester) exam at the Fort Collins Post Office. Along with several other men I eagerly took that exam and soon was offered a job with the Forest Service.

MY FOREST SERVICE CAREER

My first assignment on probation was as assistant on the Rawlins Ranger District, Medicine Bow NF, 60 miles south of Rawlins, Wyoming. No housing available, but we could live in a tent. I got permission and supplies to build a slightly elevated tent frame with wood floor. I located the frame directly over the water line between the ranger's dwelling and the warehouse, tapped that water line, scrounged up an old kitchen sink, and we had running water in our new home. Our oldest son was born that September and the nights started to really get cold. A neighbor sheep rancher brought his "Home on The Range" trailer down to the Ranger Station so we could keep baby Doug warm. My permanent appointment came soon. We moved around to different places on "The Bow" until the end of 1947.

January 1, 1948 I transferred to Intermountain Forest & Range Experiment Station, (research arm of the Forest Service) in Ogden, Utah. Flood Control Surveys. After three years I wanted to get back into administration. Moved via Cache NF to Idaho City RD on the Boise NF, to ranger at Hailey, then Ketchum, on the Sawtooth NF. Then Staff Officer, Sawtooth NF, Assistant Supervisor, Manti-LaSal NF, Utah, Supervisor of the 2 1/5 million acre Challis NF, Idaho, off to the Washington Office for 3 years, and back to R4 Regional Office to

head up Soil and Water Management for the Region for three years until I retired April 15, 1977.

It was a happy 34-year association with the finest land and water conservation agency in the United States, but Dorothy and I had some other things we wanted to do so we cut the tie. Never regretted the long career or the long retirement. **WC**