

Camp Hale



Camp Hale Construction

Before the construction of Camp Hale, the Eagle River meandered through the Pando Valley north of Leadville.

Built in the Pando Valley north of Leadville in 1942, Camp Hale served as the training grounds for the US Army's **Tenth Mountain Division** during World War II. Troops learned to ski, snowshoe, and climb at the camp, allowing them to perform important operations in northern Italy in early 1945. Many soldiers who trained at the camp later played a crucial role in developing the **ski industry** in America. After the war, Camp Hale saw occasional military use but was officially deactivated in 1965 and transferred to the White River National Forest for rehabilitation and recreational use.

Origins

In spring 1941, the US Army began to consider establishing a mountain division trained to fight in winter conditions and rugged terrain. After the United States entered World War II, the US Army's Eighty-seventh Mountain Infantry Regiment began to train near Mt. Rainier in Washington State. Soon it became clear that a larger training site would be needed. The army briefly considered a location near West Yellowstone, Montana, but it was rejected for environmental reasons (the camp would have disturbed the local trumpeter swan population).

In March 1942 the army decided to build its mountain training camp in the Pando Valley north of Leadville. The Pando Valley was originally homesteaded in the 1890s and had been used for ranching until the army acquired it in 1942. The valley met all the requirements for the army's training camp: it was large enough to support 15,000 troops; it sat at a high elevation of about 9,200 feet, with easy access to 12,000-foot mountains; the Eagle River provided a reliable water source; and Highway 24 and the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad facilitated transportation to and from the camp.

The army began construction of the camp in April 1942. Named Camp Hale, in honor of former Brigadier General Irving Hale, a Denver native, the camp occupied 1,456.8 acres of the Pando Valley floor. The army had to rechannel the meandering Eagle River and several tributaries through the valley to drain the site so that the camp could be built. Highway 24 was also rerouted around the camp. The army completed construction in November 1942 at a cost of \$31 million.

Training the Tenth Mountain Division

The US Army's first and only Mountain Infantry Division took shape at Camp Hale over the winter of 1942-43. New Eighty-fifth and Eighty-sixth Mountain Infantry Regiments were added to the existing Eighty-seventh Regiment to form the Tenth Mountain Division. All the troops arrived at Camp Hale by January 1943, and the valley buzzed with the activity of thousands of soldiers training for war. At its height the camp had more than 1,000 buildings and housed about 15,000 troops.

The vast Camp Hale site included barracks, administration buildings, a hospital, stables, a veterinary center, a field house, and areas used as parade grounds, recreation areas, and gunnery and combat ranges. Enlisted men learned how to survive in winter conditions and fight in the mountains. They practiced skiing, snowshoeing, and technical mountain climbing. Some of the first nylon climbing ropes were tested at Camp Hale.

The ski troops of the Tenth Mountain Division seemed glamorous to the public, but at Camp Hale they were often miserable. Soldiers nicknamed the camp "Camp Hell." Training was hard, requiring marches and maneuvers with heavy packs at high altitude. Soldiers often suffered from altitude sickness, frostbite, and low morale worsened by a lack of nearby entertainment options. (Leadville was often off-limits to the troops, and in any case it had increased efforts against gambling and prostitution.) Coal smoke from all the trains, stoves, and furnaces in the valley contributed to a persistent cough that the troops called the "Pando Hack."

In addition to the famed Tenth Mountain Division, Camp Hale also housed other troops, such as the 620th Engineer General Service Company, which arrived at the camp on December 5, 1943. The 200 soldiers who made up this unit were not actually engineers. Like several other army units, the 620th was made up of suspected Nazi sympathizers (mostly Germans) and other opponents of the war. The army lumped them together and dumped them at remote Camp Hale, where they were assigned various menial tasks.

The army also placed several hundred German prisoners of war at Camp Hale. Though communication between prisoners and soldiers was officially forbidden, the German prisoners and the German sympathizers in the 620th understandably got along quite well, exchanging greetings and illegal gifts. Dale Maple, a pro-Nazi Harvard graduate in the 620th, helped a small group of German prisoners to escape. With assistance from a few other men in the 620th, Maple and two Germans slipped away from the lightly guarded camp on February 15, 1944. They made their way to the Mexican border before being arrested by a Mexican customs official on February 18. The two Germans were shipped to another prisoner-of-war camp in Wyoming. Maple was convicted of desertion and aiding the enemy. Originally sentenced to death, he was released in 1951 and lived quietly in San Diego for another fifty years.

Postwar Training and Recreation

Camp Hale was always meant to be a temporary facility—hence Camp Hale instead of Fort Hale—and the army vacated the camp in June 1944, when the Tenth Mountain Division's training was complete. After serving with distinction in northern Italy during the winter and spring of 1945, the division was deactivated in October, after the end of the war. Members of the Tenth Mountain Division returned to the United States and played a crucial role in the development of the American skiing industry. Most Colorado ski areas—including [Aspen](#), Vail, and Loveland—trace their origins to the Tenth Mountain Division, as do many other ski areas across the country. In 1945 the army ordered prisoners of war to dismantle most of the buildings at Camp Hale. These materials were sent to Camp Carson (now Fort Carson) for reuse in new structures. Later, the army reactivated Camp Hale on a limited basis to serve as a



[The Tenth Mountain Division Soldier Statue in Vail](#)

Mountain Winter Warfare School and Training Center for soldiers at Fort Carson. In addition, from 1959 to 1964 the CIA used the camp to secretly train about 170 Tibetan soldiers. Camp Hale's high elevation and mountainous terrain were similar to what the Tibetans would face at home.

At the end of June 1965, the Department of the Army officially closed Camp Hale and transferred the land to the White River National Forest. The camp's facilities were either given to other government agencies or auctioned

off. After the Forest Service acquired the site, it began a long-term process of restoring the Pando Valley to its natural state. These efforts have included burying old building foundations and revegetating the surface. The Forest Service has constructed two campgrounds, the Camp Hale Memorial Campground and the East Fork Campground, on the south and southeastern ends of the site, as well as a picnic area. Interpretive signs allow visitors to take a self-guided tour of the old Camp Hale site.

The army continued to hold occasional training sessions at the Camp Hale site into the 1990s with a special-use permit from the Forest Service. Starting in the late 1990s, the US Army Corps of Engineers established the Camp Hale Military Munitions Project to remove any potentially hazardous munitions from the area. Previous sweeps had occurred in 1946 and 1965, but new work in the early 2000s uncovered several dozen live items that had to be destroyed. It is also possible that chemical weapons were tested in the area. The Corps of Engineers continues to work with the Forest Service to inform visitors about munitions and to respond to reports of munitions at the site.

In 2015, as part of the National Forest Foundation's Treasured Landscapes campaign, the Forest Service collaborated with the National Forest Foundation and local stakeholders to develop a proposal to restore wetlands in the Pando Valley. Building Camp Hale had required forcing the Eagle River into a straight, narrow ditch, destroying about 70 percent of the valley's historic wetlands. The plan would allow the Eagle River to meander as it formerly did, increasing the river's length by more than three miles and restoring up to a quarter of the wetlands. The \$30 million proposal is in a public comment and review period until summer 2016.

Author

Encyclopedia Staff

Citation

MLA 8th Edition

Encyclopedia Staff. "Camp Hale." *Colorado Encyclopedia*, <http://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/camp-hale>. Accessed 27 May 2017.

APA 6th Edition

Encyclopedia Staff. (2015, September 10). Camp Hale. *Colorado Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <http://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/camp-hale>

Chicago 16th Edition

Encyclopedia Staff, "Camp Hale," *Colorado Encyclopedia*, last modified May 16, 2017, <http://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/camp-hale>.

Note: Please check your citation to be sure that it is 100% accurate. To create citations in various formats, see [Style Guides for Bibliographies](#).

References

Allen Best, "[The Pro-Nazi American Soldier Who Aided an Escape](#)," *Colorado Central Magazine*, February 2004.
Rene L. Coquoz, *The Invisible Men on Skis: The Story of the Construction of Camp Hale and the Occupation by the*

10th Mountain Division, 1942–1945 (Boulder: Johnson Publishing Company, 1970).

Bruce Finley, “\$30 Million May Flow into Mountain Valley Restoration Project,” *Denver Post*, March 29, 2015.

Anne McKibbin, “Camp Hale,” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (August 20, 1991).

Larry Warren, “Camp Hale Site,” National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form (1980).

Additional Information

Hal Burton, *The Ski Troops* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

[Camp Hale Military Munitions Project](#), US Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District.

Curtis W. Casewit, *Mountain Troopers! The Story of the Tenth Mountain Division* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972).

Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

E. J. Kahn Jr., “The Philologist,” *New Yorker*, March 11, 18, 25, and April 1, 1950.

Related Articles



[Breckenridge Historic District](#)



[Eagle County](#)



[Granada War Relocation Center \(Amache\)](#)



[Lake County](#)



[Pitkin County](#)



[The Tenth Mountain Division](#)