

Climbing to Victory

WWII TRAINING MANEUVERS IN NEARBY, WEST VIRGINIA – 1943-44

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**





World War II mobilized millions of soldiers and citizens across the United States, and the Tri-State region was well represented in that historic effort. From production of munitions at home to participating in major battles around the globe, residents readily contributed to winning the largest conflict the world had ever experienced. Everyone played a role and everyone realized how important it was to win the war. There is one local area, however, that has not received the recognition it deserves for being a major contributor to World War II's successful conclusion. Perhaps the isolated location kept it hidden from publicity, or perhaps the years passed too quickly for timely recognition. In any event, the West Virginia Maneuver Area is worthy of recognition because of the role it played in training thousands of soldiers who deployed to all theaters of operation.

Officially called the West Virginia Maneuver Area (WVMA) by the United States Army, it encompassed five counties in the northern half of the Monongahela National Forest and operated from August 1943 to July 1944. The geographic area was vast, mountainous, and sparsely inhabited — all requirements the U.S. Army had in mind when it searched for a suitable location for specialized training programs.

Facing page: WWII soldiers train at the Seneca Rocks peak formation known as Humphrey's Head, south of the Cockscomb.

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Above: Seneca Rocks, one of the best-known landmarks in West Virginia, is a scenic attraction for visitors, hikers, and rock climbers. The magnificent formation rises nearly 900 feet above the North Fork River and is part of the Spruce Knob–Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area within the Monongahela National Forest.

In 1943, the rugged Italian peninsula occupied the minds of Allied generals who were planning a major campaign to push the Germans northward. Anticipating the obstacles troops would encounter to carry out that objective, it became apparent the Army needed to establish specialized winter warfare and mountain training programs. Reports that German troops underwent specialized winter training for use in Alaska, Canada, and possibly the Rocky Mountains, added a sense of urgency to finding a suitable location. The West Virginia Maneuver Area with its harsh winters, isolation, and similarities of terrain with the expected destination of fighting brought the Army's vast resources to West Virginia in the summer of 1943.

Residents of Elkins, WV, learned of the Army's plans by reading the newspaper on June 23, 1943. The news release informed residents their town would be headquarters to the maneuver area that was created in cooperation with the Monongahela National Forest and surrounding landowners who allowed use of their land to the federal government. The command fell to the Army XIII Corps that oversaw early arrivals from the 94th Signal Battalion and the 63 Quartermaster Battalion (that was ordered to set up laundry facilities for 40,000 personnel). Soon to follow were military police, engineers, medical personnel and other support units. The friendly invasion must have been cause for conversation among residents in the small town.

Thousands of soldiers arrived in Elkins by truck convoy and special trains, giving the town a festival like atmosphere and crowd. One resident recalled the soldiers' arrival as a "sea of khaki." Maneuver Headquarters was set up in the U.S. Forest Service Supervisor's Office in Elkins. Military camps sprang up across the WVMA. A medical field



hospital, replete with nurses, was established at a Forest recreation area outside of Elkins, known locally as “Stuart Park.” Other units set up near Bluegrass Park and at Wimer Field in South Elkins or in adjacent communities of Bowden, Alpena, Kerens, Montrose, Gladwin, Davis, and Seneca Rocks. A signal corps battalion built communication systems by using telephones, telegraphy, teletype, radios, and messenger pigeons. The herculean task of preparing and distributing 25 tons of food per day fell to the quartermaster. The military buildup made a positive impact on the local economy, particularly at hotels, restaurants and retail stores. Despite the positive influx of funds from “outsiders,” their presence initially caused some apprehension among the locals and Army personnel at headquarters in Elkins.

Cultural differences between residents and troops were poorly addressed by *Mountain Lore*, an informational pamphlet that attempted to interpret Appalachian culture for the newcomers. The handout did little good to overcome doubts some soldiers experienced when confronted with West Virginia’s terrain and “hillbilly” reputation. *Mountain Lore* misinformed soldiers that it was not unusual for a stranger to be startled by a bearded giant suddenly emerging from a thicket with a long barrel rifle in the crook of his arm. Soldiers were also wrongly told that horseback

Downtown Elkins, WV, circa 1940, Davis Avenue and Third Street. These buildings and stores would have been well known to those soldiers lucky enough to have a pass to visit. The YMCA was located not far from here and was a favorite location for troops as it had a C&P Telephone exchange set up for WVMA soldiers to call home or send telegrams to loved ones. PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT C. WHETSELL

riding and walking were the primary means of travel in West Virginia.

Sergeant Sylvan “Woodie” Waldrip, a 23-year-old climbing instructor, recorded his initiation to West Virginia in a 15-page memoir. “It was with mixed feelings of dread and expectation that I went into West Virginia.” Woodie wrote that he heard about how “back woodsy” and “uneducated” the people were and how “outmoded” everything was in the area. Those stereotypes were shattered upon arrival in Elkins. Woodie found Elkins to be “much like any other town I had been in. The same stores, same window displays, advertisements, signs—there was no difference.” Another surprising observation was that all the people wore shoes!

Similar experiences were recorded by the soldiers who enjoyed homemade pies, cakes and other treats offered by residents when they were encountered in the field. Troops reciprocated by providing entertainment at the YMCA,



Left: These two soldiers, men from the 95th Infantry Division, are posing in front of Seneca Rocks with their climbing gear. Members of this division were the last unit to train in the WVMA. After D-Day the program closed and units began shipping overseas. The 95th headed to the European Theater and fought in France and Germany.

Richard Schoen (left) and Frank “Lefty” Sadjewski, photographed in June 1944. The soldier in the background with a white stripe on his helmet is a climbing instructor with the MTG. Instructors were required to wear a white strip on their helmets so students could recognize them.

*PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT C. WHETSELL/
RICHARD SCHOEN*

Below: Pup tent encampment area for the U.S. Army’s Low Altitude Assault Climbing School at Seneca Rocks. The camp was located on the Wilbur Kisamore farm just north of Seneca Rocks. Students slept in a field in two man pup tents, while instructors shared five man canvas pyramidal tents with wooden floors in a shaded grove near the river (background). For the training, men were issued special rucksacks and other specialized equipment designed for climbing and fighting in mountainous terrain—several of these rucksacks can be seen in front of the tents.

*PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT C. WHETSELL/
RICHARD SCHOEN*

high school and other venues. While some recreational time was welcomed by instructors, most soldiers soon found themselves engaged in rigorous training programs across the maneuver area, particularly at Seneca Rocks.

Technical advisors from Camp Hale, Colorado, established the assault climbing school at Seneca Rocks, a community found at the junction of WV 28, US 33 and WV 55 in Pendleton County. Known for its scenic beauty and 900-foot Tuscarora rock formation, the rural area underwent a transformation as soldiers deployed and set up a tent community at the base of towering rocks. The Camp Hale detachment included expert mountain climbers from the Army’s Mountain Training Group (MTG), whose members later distinguished themselves in fighting at Riva Ridge, Italy, as part of the 10th Mountain Division.

The climbing school averaged 180 men and officers who underwent training in 14 day cycles that included





28th Infantry Division soldiers scaling Seneca Rocks, August 1943. Week two of the training emphasized rigging, use of assault ropes, rappelling, piton use and more climbing.

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assaulting the sheer cliff. According to reports, each instructor was assigned 10 men who were initiated into the basics of rock climbing for one week. The weakest four men were “washed out,” after seven days and the remaining six received an additional week of training. Prior to assaulting the cliffs, soldiers practiced climbing and rappelling off wooden climbing towers nicknamed “corn cribs” specially created to teach climbing and belaying to the rookie climbers.

Week two training placed emphasis on rigging, use of assault ropes, rope tying, rappelling, piton use, and pulleys. Associated rock climbing techniques were demonstrated, practiced, and rehearsed until the teams were proficient in all phases of climbing. To demonstrate proficiency, groups made tactical night climbs on unfamiliar cliffs. Despite difficult weather conditions and challenging tasks, only one climber, an instructor, was seriously injured during the assault training school program at Seneca Rocks.

A concurrent program in the WVMA emphasized physical conditioning. During the first week, instruction included night and mountain driving, cross country marches and packboard usage. The second week consisted of exercises commonly called “war games,” in which battalions were given “problems” involving the engagement of enemy forces in rugged terrain. These field exercises ranged in difficulty from setting up simple road blocks to heavy fighting.

The 77th Infantry Divisions experienced the worst conditions of the year when subzero temperatures and blizzard conditions struck the camp. Weapons became coated with ice as freezing winds whipped through valleys and over hills. Ironically, the troops who endured the coldest West Virginia conditions during the WVMA winter were deployed to the Pacific Theater.

One tragic exercise occurred in March 1944 when a soldier crossing the Blackwater River near Davis, WV, became overwhelmed in swift water. An officer attempted to



Prior to assaulting the cliffs, soldiers practiced climbing and rappelling off wooden climbing towers nicknamed "corn cribs." PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT C. WHETSELL / NORM LINDHJEM

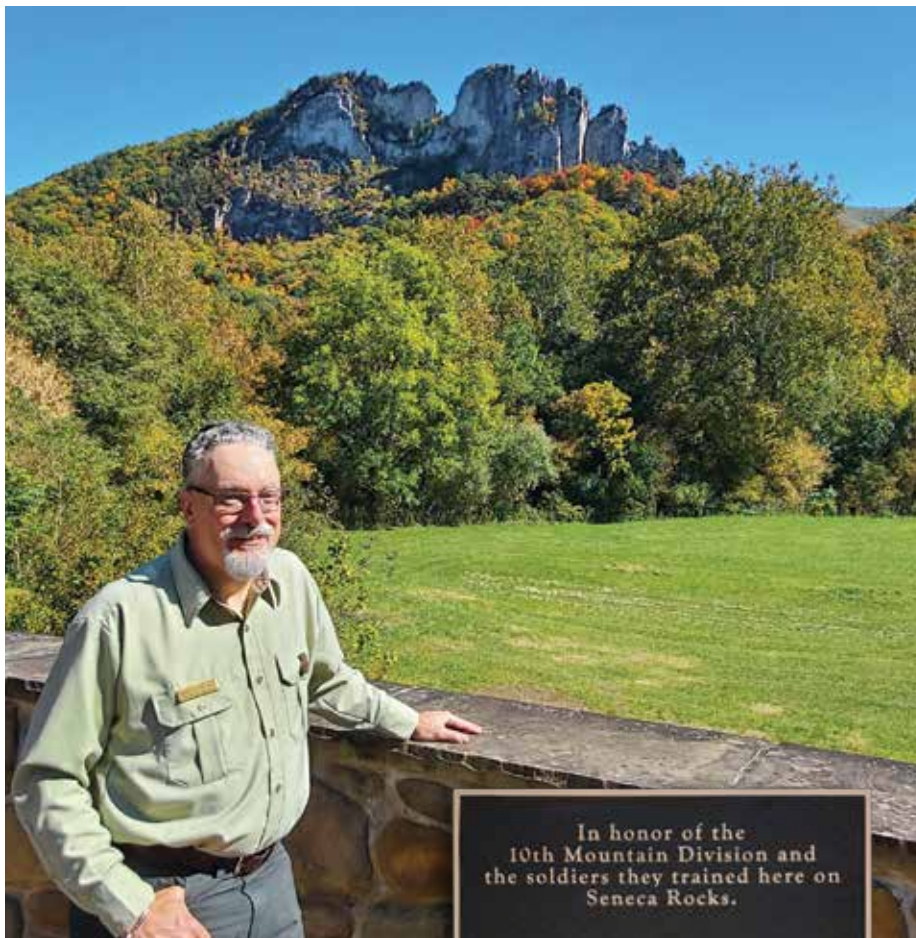
rescue the soldier, but raging waters swept him into the current. Farther downstream, a third soldier also attempted to assist and was lost. In total, all three men from the 35th Infantry Division lost their lives in the unfortunate incident. For their valiant effort to save their comrade, each man received a rare posthumous Purple Heart medal from the Army, the only known medals to be awarded to soldiers during the West Virginia Maneuvers.

The WVMA once again answered the call when wartime conditions in Italy highlighted the need for pack mules. It was observed that rugged terrain hampered mechanized units and the transportation of heavy artillery. The Army found that mortars, transported by pack mules, was more effective in supporting troops, rather than attempting to move heavy artillery. The Army responded by transferring a Quartermaster Pack Company from Colorado to Elkins. Using the Seneca Rocks format, instruction was provided in animal management to teams camped near Gladwin, WV.

Two hundred and ninety-two animals were drafted into the packers' school.

In the fall of 1943, one of the most unusual programs of the WVMA set up shop at the base of Seneca Rocks, in close proximity to the climbers. Messenger pigeons were transported to the site where instructors implemented a new element to the program. Birds have a history of military service in different wars, and were thought to be of possible use in the current conflict. Problems quickly arose however because the wooden carriers strapped on climbers' backs added weight, caused balance problems, and rubbed skin raw.

As planned, two pigeons were outfitted with plastic tubes containing the same written message. The duo was intended to improve the odds of getting a message through to the receiver. The birds also provided an immediate life line for the novice climbers because there was no other way to communicate with the base camp in the event of an accident. Unfortunately, West Virginia hawks intervened



In honor of the
10th Mountain Division
and the soldiers they trained here on
Seneca Rocks.

In 1943-44 these men climbed
here to prepare themselves for the
difficulties of mountain warfare
before facing action during
World War II.

and became unwelcome predators. The few pigeons remaining today around Seneca Rocks may have descended from the military program.

One Elkins resident grew up with the maneuver area stories and became intrigued by them. Robert “Rob” C. Whetsell, currently working with the Monongahela National Forest as North Zone Archeologist, encountered stories early in his career as a forest historian. By that time some of the tales had achieved folklore status, including ones about soldiers falling into rattlesnake dens—something that was never verified. After reading a few articles and locating photographs of assault climbers taken by *Baltimore Sun* photographer, Aubrey Bodine, Rob decided to pursue the WVMA story in a more formal way. “In particular, I wondered how many of the instructors and the men they trained were still around. So I reached out to reunion groups to put the word out. Fortunately, some instructors and former WVMA soldiers contacted me. I later made visits to the Pacific Northwest to interview a few surviving MTG instructors from the climbing program—all have since passed.”

Left: Rob Whetsell, Monongahela National Forest employee and Elkins, WV, resident, researched the history of the WVMA and the Army’s climbing school at Seneca Rocks in 1943-1944. He has since published articles on the Maneuvers and produced a 15-minute interpretive film about the climbing program that can be viewed at the Seneca Rocks Discovery Center.

PHOTO COURTESY DAN WHETZEL

Inset: 10th Mountain Division historical marker located at U.S. Forest Service’s Seneca Rocks Discovery Center.

Below: President Truman presents the Medal of Honor to Pfc. Desmond T. Doss for his bravery at the Battle of Okinawa. Desmond was portrayed in the 2016 movie “Hacksaw Ridge.”



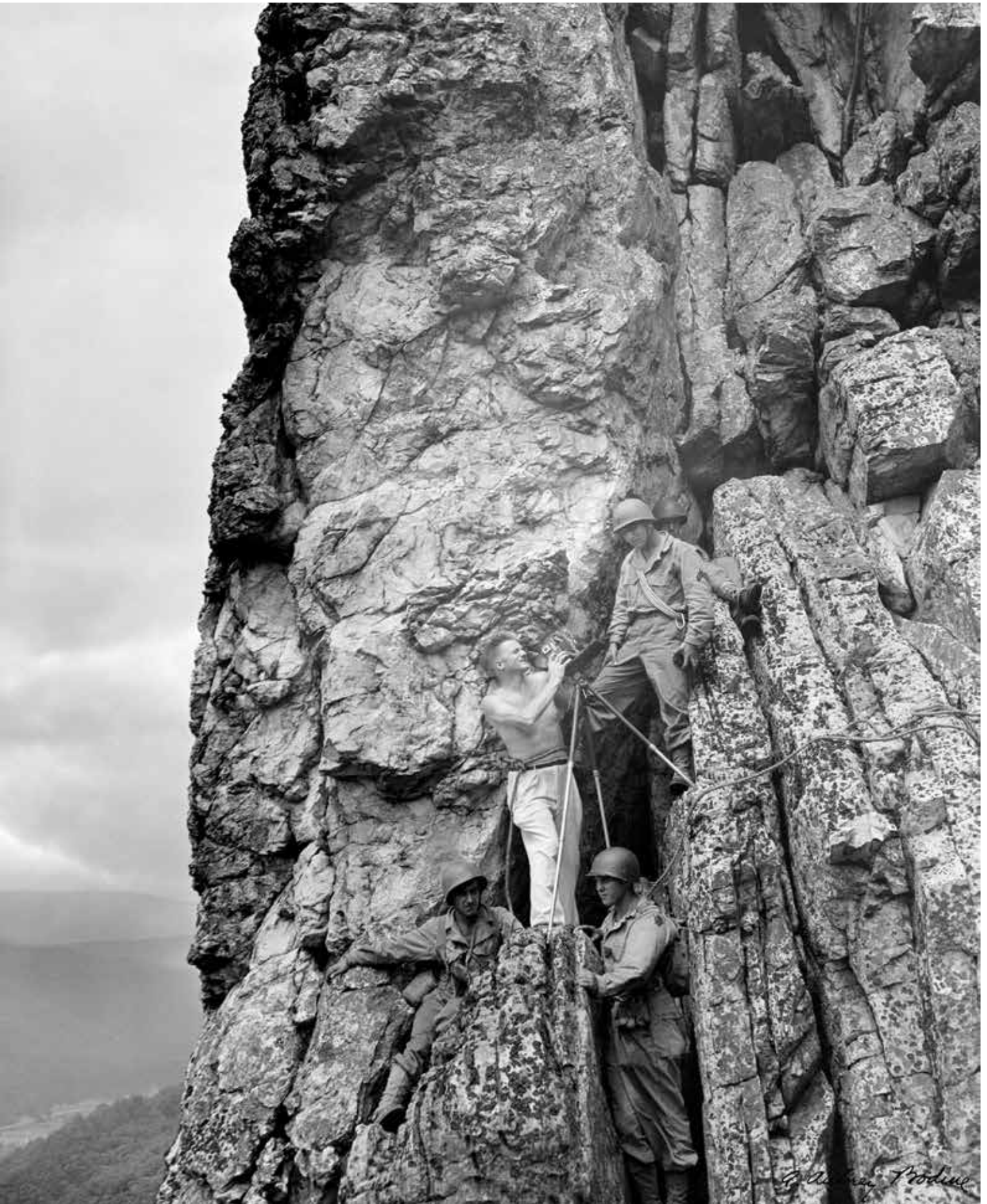
Rob published a magazine article, followed by a 15 minute video production, which not only captured stories of the school, but also brought recognition

to the Seneca Rocks climbers. The video is shown to visitors at the Seneca Rocks Discovery Center.

A recent major film also helped draw attention to the dangers of assault climbing in warfare. The 2016 movie, “Hacksaw Ridge,” told the story of Pfc. Desmond T. Doss, a conscientious objector during World War II who was awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery at the Battle of Okinawa. Rob notes that Pfc. Doss’ skills were acquired through training at the WVMA. According to Rob, “Pfc. Desmond Doss, a medic of the 77th Infantry Division’s 307th Infantry Regiment, received assault climbing training

Facing page: *Baltimore Sun* photographer A. Aubrey Bodine (light pants), goes “above and beyond” to capture the intensive assault training of these soldiers from the 28th Infantry Division during the summer of 1943. Imagine how difficult to haul the heavy camera and tripod to record these photos for historic preservation.

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during the maneuvers. In May 1945, despite his own wounds while under enemy fire during the Battle of Okinawa, Doss used his knot tying and evacuation skills learned during the maneuvers, to save 75 wounded soldiers, lowering them to safety on a rope from an escarpment known as Hacksaw Ridge. For his actions in Okinawa, Doss was awarded the Medal of Honor.”

More than 100,000 soldiers trained in the WVMA until July 1944 when it abruptly closed following the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. Those who served at WVMA were deployed to all theaters of operation. While most physical reminders of the facilities have been erased, some artifacts are ever present such as at the former Dolly Sods firing range. During the war the open land served for munitions firing training, including howitzer rounds and mortars. Despite ordnance clearance efforts by the military, visitors to the environmentally unique area are advised to be wary of unexploded ordnance left from the wartime maneuvers.

Visitors to Seneca Rocks have plenty of options for sight-seeing and learning experiences. The Sites Homestead and Heritage Garden, adjacent to the Discovery Center, is a restored mid 19th century structure that hosts a variety of events throughout the year. The Seneca Rocks Discovery

Center (304-567-2827) not only serves as a comprehensive visitor center, but also hosts training sessions and special events. Artifacts from the climbing school, environmental exhibits, and geographic displays are offered for viewing during the April to October operating season.

Mountain Discoveries acknowledges Robert C. Whetsell's invaluable assistance in preparing this article.

Also acknowledged is Donald L. Rice and Army History magazine.



The Sites Homestead and Heritage Garden is located adjacent to the Discovery Center at Seneca Rocks.

PHOTO COURTESY DAN WHETZEL

