

Book Review

Phantoms in the Snow

by Kathleen Benner Duple

NY: Scholastic Press, 2011

Have you ever wondered what it was like to train at Camp Hale, to prepare for the assault on Riva Ridge and Mount Belvedere in Italy, or be part of the Riva and Belvedere attacks in 1945? Kathleen Benner Duple has written an account of the Tenth Mountain Division's training, preparation, and attacks in her historical fiction book "Phantoms in the Snow," published by Scholastic Press in 2011.

The reader arrives at Camp Hale near Leadville, Colorado via a 15 year old fictional character named Noah Garrett. Noah is orphaned in 1944 when his parents die of smallpox. After the funeral, Noah is sent from rural Texas to his only relative, an estranged uncle named James Shelley, who is a Phantom soldier with the Tenth Mountain Division at Camp Hale, Colorado. Noah quickly learns why the Tenth Mountain soldiers are nicknamed Phantoms, "...the soldiers that ski. You can't even see them when they're in the mountains. They disappear like ghosts. They can ski and hike faster than normal people."

The first half of the book takes place in Colorado. Noah takes us into Camp Hale's barracks and mess hall, and like most new recruits, Noah learns how to ski, hike, rappel, and climb mountains. The reader quickly experiences what a Tenth Mountain soldier needs to do physically, mentally, and emotionally. This is the new world that Noah must conquer if he is to stay with his uncle. The reader not only experiences the training and life of a soldier at Camp Hale but also confronts issues of loneliness, war, and friendship.

Noah is from a family of pacifists. During his time at Camp Hale, Noah comes to grips with the necessity of war when his comrade Daniel

"...handed him a creased newspaper article from his pocket. Noah stared down at the headline, JEWS BEING ROUNDED UP AND EXTERMINATED IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS, under which was a picture of thousands of shoes, lying in a jumble. His stomach began to churn as he read about the mass killing of the owners of those shoes. Could this really be possible?"

"He didn't know how to reconcile being a pacifist with the horrors of what was being done to others in Europe... And now what was he supposed to do about it?"

When the Tenth Mountain Division goes to Texas for extra training and then to Virginia to be shipped out, Noah is with his uncle and newfound friends, albeit with untried military skills and emotions.

The last third of the book is set in Italy. Once again, the author takes the reader into the life of a Tenth Mountain soldier. Noah is part of night patrols at the base of Riva Ridge. During these patrols, the soldiers must learn the terrain, spy on Germans, and "find several ways up Riva." Crisis comes to Noah's company of thirty men when their leader is not strong enough to assume the leadership position for the assault on Riva Ridge. At this point, Noah confronts the universal themes of courage and manhood and is able to reconcile his parents' beliefs about war with his own.

Historical fiction always is open to an analysis of fact. Yes, some of the facts in "Phantoms in the Snow" are modified. However, Kathleen Benner Duple uses a lengthy Author's Note to explain which events were changed and why she decided to alter historical facts. "Phantoms in the Snow" is written for young readers, perhaps fourth through eighth grades, but teen and adult readers will find the book interesting and beneficial because of its historical setting and gripping narrative.

Reviewed by Susan Andrews, retired teacher
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