Battle Tested

By Joe Carberry

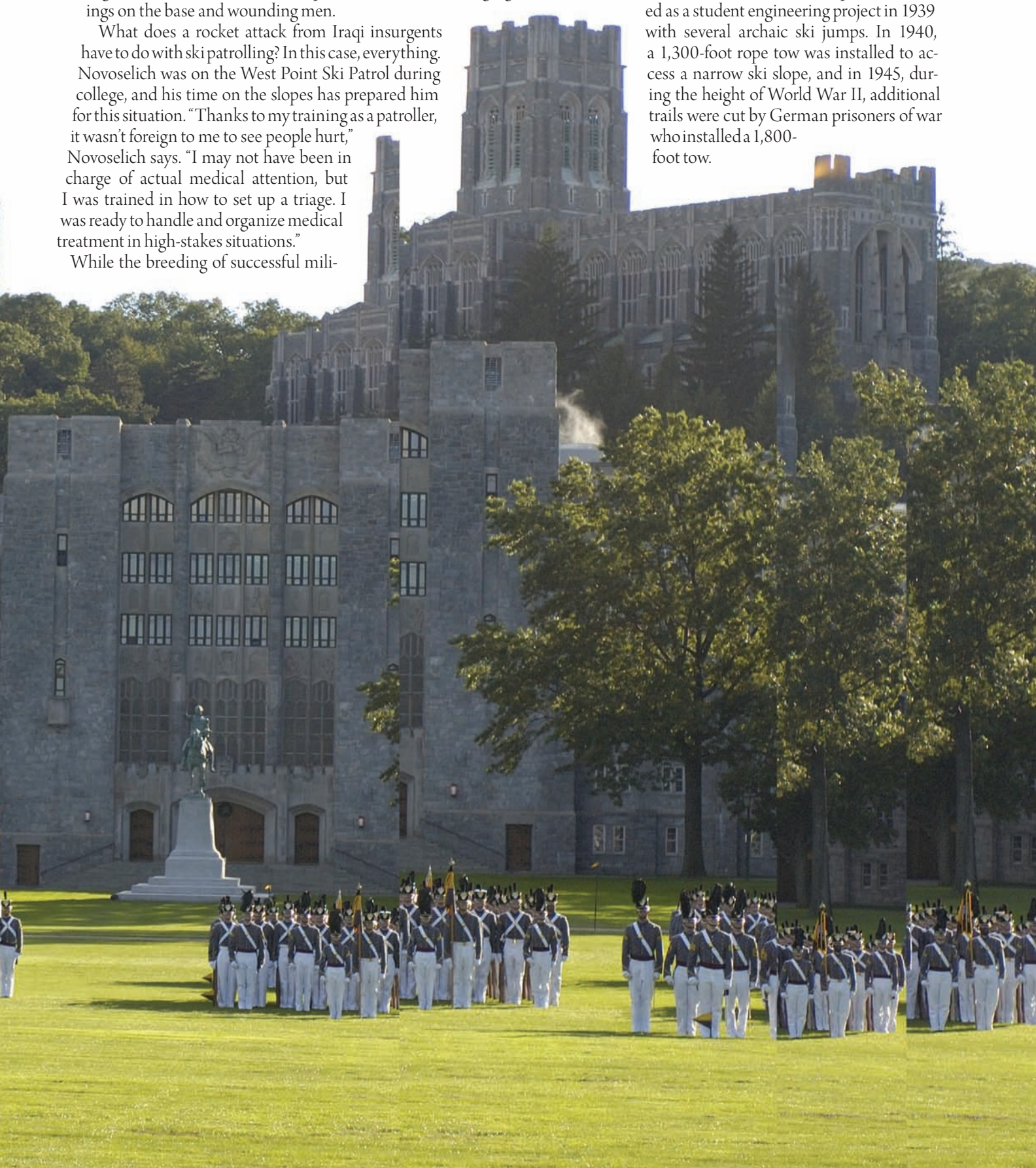
Ski patrolling cadets at West Point are trained for the slopes and beyond.

The sound of mortars exploding outside the U.S. airbase north of Baghdad isn't a good sign. In fact, explosions anywhere in the Iraqi desert—referred to by members of the U.S. military as "The Sandbox"—make the hair on a soldier's neck stand up.

Major Brian Novoselich is going about his day the way he usually does: taking a moment for lunch or going over orders for an upcoming mission. But this time, the explosions hit home, damaging buildings on the base and wounding men.

What does a rocket attack from Iraqi insurgents have to do with ski patrolling? In this case, everything. Novoselich was on the West Point Ski Patrol during college, and his time on the slopes has prepared him for this situation. "Thanks to my training as a patroller, it wasn't foreign to me to see people hurt," Novoselich says. "I may not have been in charge of actual medical attention, but I was trained in how to set up a triage. I was ready to handle and organize medical treatment in high-stakes situations."

While the breeding of successful military personnel from West Point is celebrated, graduating ski patrollers isn't as well publicized. West Point is perhaps America's foremost military academy, located 50 miles north of New York City on the Hudson River. A small three-run ski hill on campus, owned and operated by the school–the Victor Constant Ski Slope–was started as a student engineering project in 1939 with several archaic ski jumps. In 1940, a 1,300-foot rope tow was installed to access a narrow ski slope, and in 1945, during the height of World War II, additional trails were cut by German prisoners of war who installed a 1,800-foot tow.



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Captain Constant had an enormous influence on West Point skiing, coaching the ski team and helping to develop the 500-vertical-foot hill. The area was renamed after him when he was killed in February of 1946 in a skiing accident at a national downhill race at Cannon Mountain, N.H. Today the ski slope is open only to federal employees as well as current and retired military personnel and is one of few ski facilities on a college campus.

The hill has always been challenged by inconsistent snow conditions (several seasons have been completely scrapped), but enthusiasm at the area has never wavered. The West Point Ski Patrol was established in 1949, and today it's one of the most popular clubs on campus. "We have 200 cadets apply for (approximately 25 spots on) the patrol each season," says Ben Zederbaum, emergency medical training director at West Point. "It's an elite club on post."

Elite because of the aforementioned medical training the cadets receive during their time on the patrol. West Point is a unique community with an on-post hospital located 2,100 feet from the base of the slopes. The Keller Army Community Hospital (KACH) is home to some of the Army's most experienced doctors and medics, including Dr. Anthony Hirtz, the patrol's medical director, who has spent the last two years developing extensive medical protocols and operating procedures for the group.

Zederbaum oversees this training. A veteran EMT from New York City, Zederbaum has taken elements from all walks of prehospital care and turned the program into one of the most advanced ski patrol medical training processes in the country. "These students are brilliant young minds able to comprehend medical concepts without much elaboration," Zederbaum says. "We bring together a lot of curricula and expand well beyond Outdoor Emergency Care. We bring in combat medics fresh from Iraq and Afghanistan, add elements of Tactic Combat Casualty Care and Combat Life Saving (CLS), not to mention urban EMT techniques. It's a humbling task to teach these students, knowing where they're going to use the information."

CLS is a high level of training developed by the Army that's not available to civilians. The curriculum is offered to cadets, and many ski patrol members have received CLS certification. "Although the protocol is neither advised nor offered to civilian care providers, we believe that in these times sound knowledge is better than no knowledge," says Patrol Director Robert DiBenedetto. "Another goal is to insure the members of patrol become intricately familiar with the trauma and medical supplies being used in the combat field."

Once all these resources are poured into giving cadet patrollers topnotch training, patrol directors don't want to lose them when their time at the academy is up. That's why in 2006 DiBenedetto lobbied to have the West Point patrol moved to the NSP's European Division from the Eastern Division spot it had always occupied. "Our primary goal was to enable our graduating class members to continue as NSP members when deployed overseas," says DiBenedetto. "In June (2007), the NSP ratified the move so we could use our cadet patrollers (if) they get transferred to Europe"

Ski patrols on any hill are relatively regimented and organized. A disorganized patrol would resemble the Keystone Cops: pure comedy. And comedy doesn't apply when trying to evacuate skiers from a mountain, stabilizing a broken bone or any other ski area medical treatment for that matter–save overseeing a cardboard downhill. Chaotic situations take time to master, and the practice of organizing people in stressful situations is, perhaps, the single biggest draw for cadets to the ski patrol. "It's basically about keeping cool under high pressure," says Jeff Caslen, the patrol's Cadet in Charge whose father, General Robert Caslen, was also a West Point patroller. "I'm not going to be

dreamed of returning to their home in the west, and they're finally on the cusp of doing it. Bedey has been on the West Point Ski Patrol for two years and recently passed the OEC Instructor course. He hopes to transfer to a patrol near Hamilton.

a medic, but I've been trained that way and I can organize people when it gets stressful. And that will give me a leg up on other officers."

Cadet patrollers are so advanced in their first aid training, they end up teaching fellow students. "It's an incredible resource, to have these patrollers that are able to teach their peers," adds General Caslen, also a former 10th Mountain Division soldier.

It would be difficult not to equate the West Point Ski Patrol with the 10th Mountain Division, the group of mountain soldiers based at Fort Drum four hours away in Watertown, N.Y. Fort Drum was known as Camp Drum in the 1940s, and the storied 10th Mountain Division of WWII trained there before deploying to Italy and Europe. After WWII the 10th Mountain Division was deactivated until the mid-80s, when it was reactivated as a light Infantry Division stationed at Fort Drum. "We have a very close relationship with the 10th," says General Caslen. "It's the closest active division to West Point, so we are always sending cadets up there to train in the summer." Many West Point graduates end up serving in the 10th Mountain Division because of their prior alpine experience.

Young or old, military personal working on the West Point Ski Patrol are often better prepared. Not only for combat situations but also to be ski patrollers in other parts of the country. Take Hamilton, Mont., native Colonel David Bedey. This former head of the Department of Physics at West Point is about to retire from the military after 30 years. He and his wife have

The West Point Patrol is definitely different. Interview a cadet and you'll be called "sir" more than you'd like. But this diverse group of future leaders goes through life following a stringent code of "duty, honor and country." These aren't just words etched in granite at the academy, but a template the cadets live by.

When Zederbaum first arrived on campus, the amount of respect the cadets showed one another, their superiors and their code of honor surprised him. Zederbaum got to witness it first hand. He was one of the initial responders during 9/11, setting up medical triage just yards away from the World Trade Center. When one of the ski patrol cadets heard his story, the cadet invited him to "Chow," considered an honor for civilians.

The Cadet Mess Hall is an expansive room with an observation deck in the middle that rises two to three stories above the dining room. The cadet asked Zederbaum to follow him up on the observation deck where he and another student called the dining room full of cadets to order. They proceeded to announce Zederbaum as a guest of honor, telling the students of his experience at the World Trade Center. "They started cheering and pounding their plates," Zederbaum says. "I'm not a man of few words, but I was speechless. I'm continually blown away by the amount of respect they show every day. It's a surreal community that's based on honor."

Despite the advanced medical training, the West Point Ski Patrol is still a ski patrol. But in today's day and age, when these West Point cadets are being sent into the field of battle and need to be prepared for war, there may be no better way to ready them than the high-pressure experience of patrol work. +

Photos: 1: West Point PD Bobby DiBenedetto. **2**: A tidy patrol shack. **3**: Casey is an integral part of daily patrol life and has been trained for top secret missions. **4**: Patrollers Brian Carlson and Chris O'Keefe. **5**: Ben Zederbaum and DiBenedetto. **6**: Former patrol director Manny Schweitzer. **7**: The West Point Color Guard.