

UNH Skier Awarded Purple Heart

Thursday, February 14, 2013

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Ralph Townsend '49, '53G was a four-event skiing star at UNH before serving in World War II.

Ralph J. Townsend was born in Lebanon, NH. After graduating high school in 1940, he enrolled in the horticulture program at UNH where he was not only a four-event skiing star, but he was also a cadet in the Army ROTC program. His college career was interrupted by service in World War II.

Townsend responded to the National Ski Patrol's call for experienced outdoorsmen to join the war effort. The Army's 10th Mountain Division, dubbed the "ski troops" by the press, specialized in mountaineering and cold-weather survival as well as military tactics, fighting on skis and snow shoes. He was a squad leader in the third platoon of K Company, 8th Regiment. In March 1945, K Company led the attack on the steep hill of Cimon della Piella. During the attack, Technical Sergeant Townsend was seriously wounded for which he received the Purple Heart. Doctors predicted he would not be able to ski competitively again.

He returned to his studies – and skiing – at UNH. During his junior year, he won the national Nordic Combined Championship after which he was a member of the 1948 U.S. Olympic Team before repeating his claim to the Nordic Combined Championship title in his senior year. He received his BS degree in 1949 and his MS degree in 1953, both from the University of New Hampshire.

Townsend began his career at Williams College in 1950 as assistant professor of physical education. During his 22 years as a ski coach, his teams regularly placed among the best in the nation. Among numerous other national recognition awards he received for his career as both competitor and coach, he was named to the UNH 100 Club Athletic Hall of Fame in 1982 and the UNH ROTC Hall of Fame in 1988. Ralph Townsend died in May 1988, at the age of 66.

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