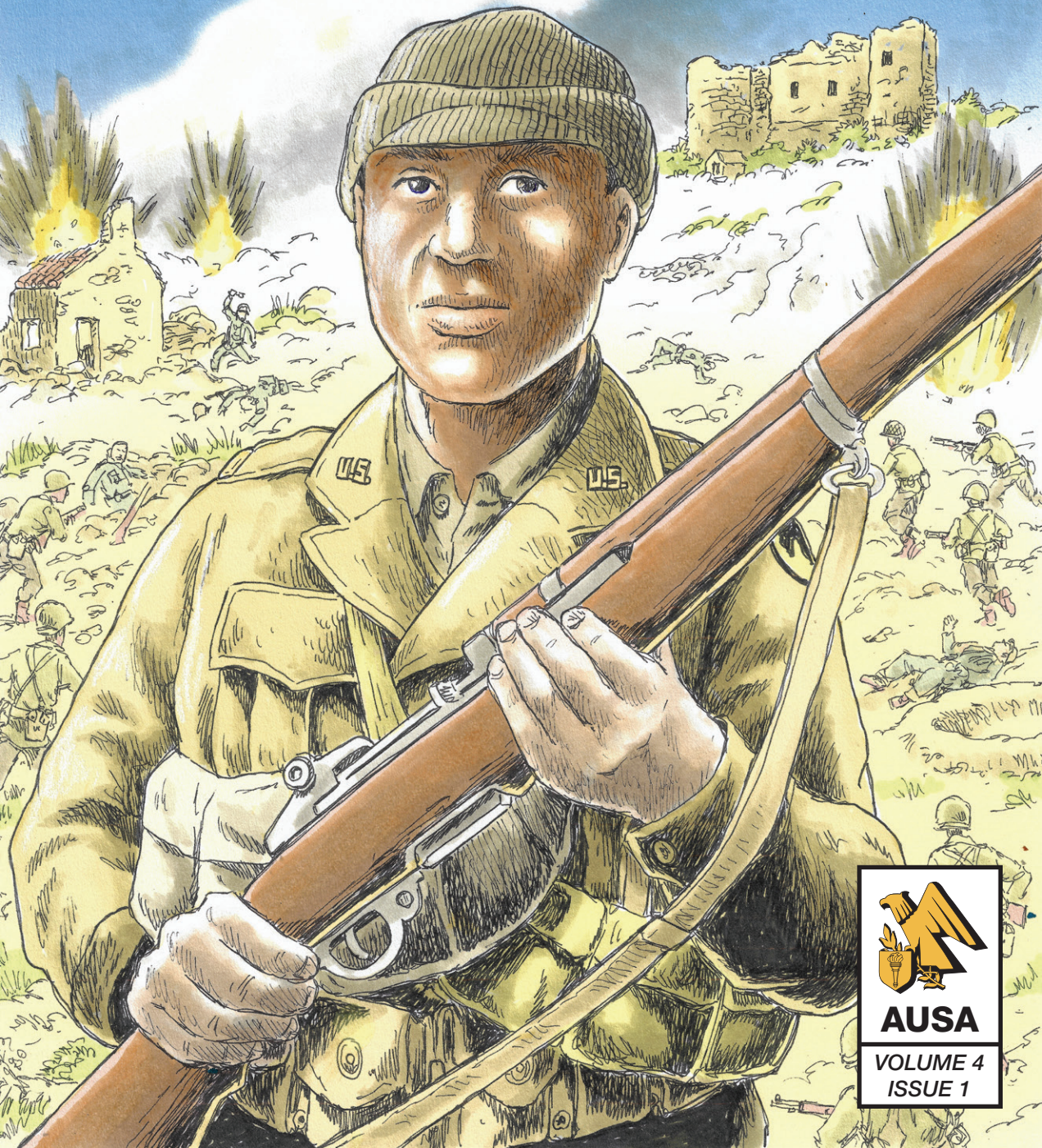


MEDAL OF HONOR

VERNON BAKER



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MEDAL OF HONOR

VERNON BAKER

SCRIPT
CHUCK DIXON

PENCILS & INKS
WAYNE VANSANT

COLORS
PETER PANTAZIS

LETTERING
TROY PETERI

COVER
WAYNE VANSANT

PRODUCER & EDITOR
JOSEPH CRAIG

DESIGNER
KEVIN IRWIN

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SOMETIMES, ON THE BATTLEFIELD, *ONE* MAN CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE. IN THE BRUTAL FIGHT TO WREST THE ITALIAN PENINSULA FROM THE STRANGLEHOLD OF HITLER'S ARMY. THAT MAN WAS...



VERNON BAKER

BORN IN CHEYENNE, WYOMING, VERNON BAKER WAS ORPHANED AT AGE FOUR AND TAKEN IN BY HIS GRANDPARENTS.

HE JOINED HIS GRANDFATHER AS A RAILROAD PORTER AND WORKED THROUGHOUT THE GREAT DEPRESSION.

HIS FIRST ATTEMPT TO JOIN THE ARMY WAS REBUFFED.

WE AIN'T GOT NO QUOTAS FOR YOU PEOPLE.

DETERMINED TO ENLIST, BAKER RETURNED AND WAS ACCEPTED INTO THE INFANTRY.

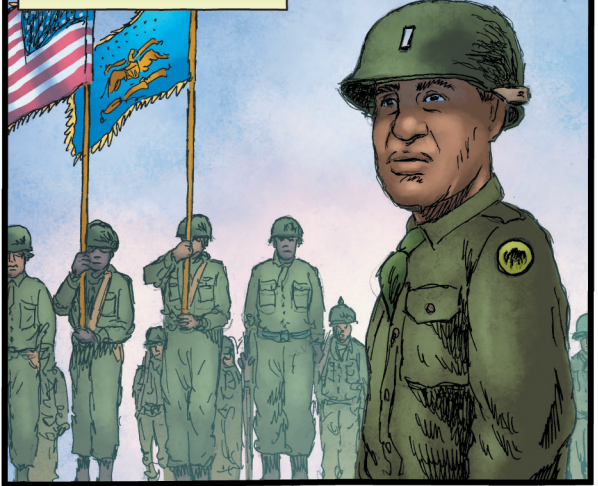
BAKER WAS 'VOLUNTEERED' FOR OFFICER'S TRAINING TO FILL AN URGENT NEED FOR BLACK OFFICERS.

HE AND HIS FELLOW CANDIDATES WERE SEGREGATED WHILE RECEIVING THEIR INSTRUCTION.



HIS HARD WORK AND DEDICATION EARNED HIM A SECOND LIEUTENANT'S BARS IN THE 92ND INFANTRY DIVISION.

THIS WAS THE UNIT FAMOUSLY KNOWN AS THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS.



IN ORDER TO PREPARE FOR LEADING MEN IN COMBAT, BAKER STUDIED ACCOUNTS OF PAST BATTLES AND ANY MANUAL HE COULD FIND.

THAT LIEUTENANT ALWAYS GOT HIS NOSE IN A BOOK.

MAYBE HE'S LOOKIN' FOR HITLER'S ADDRESS.



JULY 1944.

BAKER AND THE 370TH INFANTRY COMBAT TEAM DISEMBARKED NEAR NAPLES.



HE PROVED HIMSELF TO BE MORE THAN CAPABLE AS A COMBAT LEADER THROUGH THAT BLOODY SUMMER.

IN THE FALL HE WAS WOUNDED AND MOVED TO A HOSPITAL NEAR PISA UNTIL THE END OF THE YEAR.

HE WOULD BE RELEASED, FIT FOR DUTY, FOR WHAT WOULD BE THE FIGHT OF HIS LIFE.



1945. THE GOTHIC LINE WAS A KNIFE DRAWN ACROSS THE TOP OF ITALY'S BOOT AND MANNED BY GERMANS DETERMINED TO KEEP THE ALLIES FROM THE SOFT UNDERBELLY OF THE THIRD REICH.

CASTLE AGHINOLFI WAS ONE OF THESE STRONGHOLDS, THE APEX OF WHAT THE ITALIAN PARTISANS CALLED THE TRIANGLE OF TERROR.

THE SLOPES BELOW THE CASTLE WERE DOTTED WITH DOZENS OF MACHINE GUN NESTS, LISTENING POSTS, AND MINES.

FOLLOWING A PRE-DAWN ARTILLERY BARRAGE, THE LIEUTENANT LED A TWENTY-FIVE MAN WEAPONS PLATOON UP THE GAUNTLET OF A ROCKY DRAW.

AS THEY ASCENDED THE DRAW, BAKER SPOTTED A GLINT OF SUNLIGHT OFF AN OBJECT AHEAD.

THAT YOUR DRESS JACKET YOU'RE WEARIN', SIR?

SURE IS.

IF I'M GONNA DIE I WANT TO GO UP SHARP.

HOLD.

EVERY STEP ON THE PATH TO THE SUMMIT WAS A POTENTIAL DEATH TRAP.

IT WAS A GERMAN FORWARD OBSERVATION POST.

HE CLEANED IT OUT SINGLE-HANDEDLY.



FIGURING THAT THE FORWARD POST SERVED A NEARBY MACHINE GUN NEST, BAKER TOOK CARE OF THAT THREAT.



THE COMPANY COMMANDER HAD ARRIVED TO FINALIZE THE PUSH FOR THE CASTLE.

BRING UP THE MACHINE GUNS FOR COVERING FIRE. ANY WORD ON THE MORTARS?

NOT YET, SIR.



BUT THEIR PLANS WERE INTERRUPTED.



GRENADE!



IT'S A DUD, SIR!

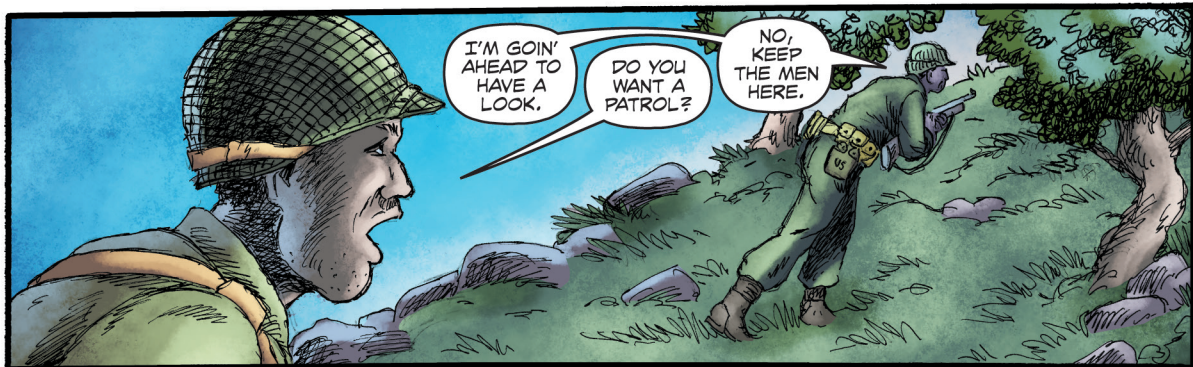


BAKER TOOK THE INITIATIVE.

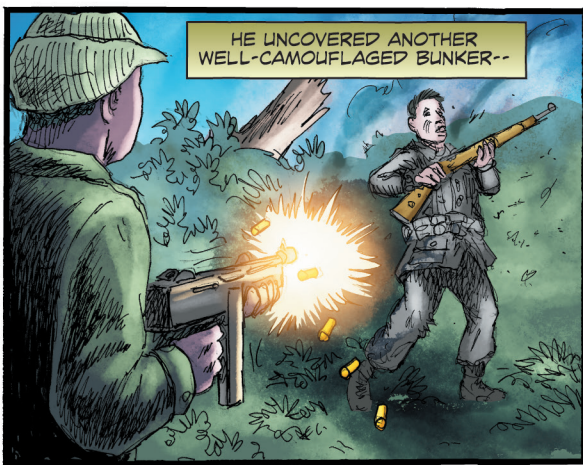
LET'S MAKE A TRADE, SOLDIER.

I'LL HOLD THAT THOMPSON A WHILE.

SURE THING, LIEUT.



LIEUTENANT BAKER DID MORE THAN HAVE A LOOK.



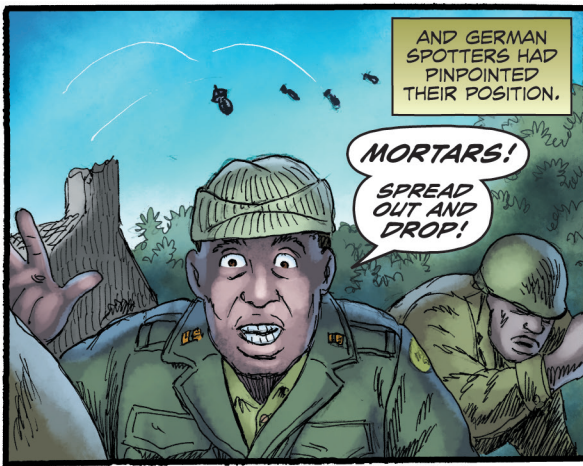
HE UNCOVERED ANOTHER WELL-CAMOUFLAGED BUNKER--



--AND, WITH GRENADES AND A SUBMACHINE GUN, TOOK IT OUT.



HE RETURNED TO HIS MEN TO FIND THEY HAD ENGAGED ENEMY TROOPS WITH GRENADES AND SMALL ARMS.



AND GERMAN SPOTTERS HAD PINPOINTED THEIR POSITION.



ROUNDS FROM HEAVY MORTARS RAINED DOWN.

WHEN THE STORM WAS OVER, THREE MEN LAY DEAD WITH THREE MORE WOUNDED.



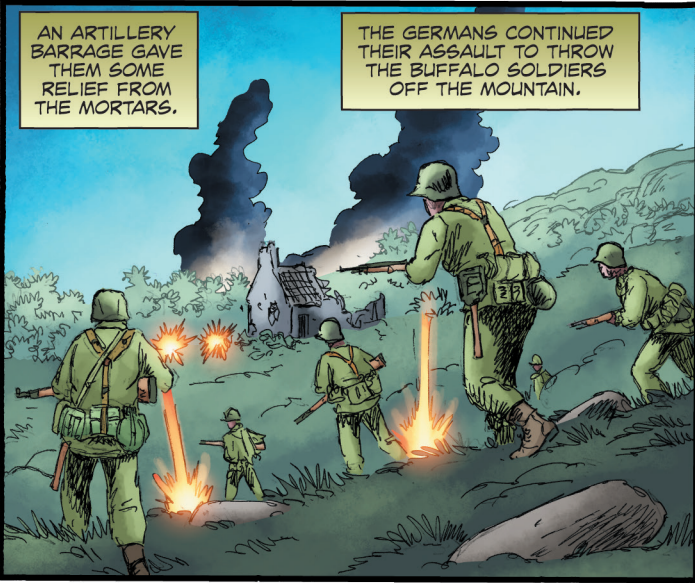
FORM A PERIMETER. SHOOT ANYTHING THAT MOVES.



THIS IS CHARLIE COMPANY! WE'RE IN FRONT OF THE CASTLE AND CATCHING HELL!

WE HAVE NO REPORTS OF ANY UNITS UP THAT HIGH.

WE NEED THAT ARTILLERY NOW!



AN ARTILLERY BARRAGE GAVE THEM SOME RELIEF FROM THE MORTARS.

THE GERMANS CONTINUED THEIR ASSAULT TO THROW THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS OFF THE MOUNTAIN.



BAKER FOUND THE COMPANY COMMANDER NEARBY.

CAPTAIN, WE MUST STAY AND FIGHT IT OUT.

WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS!



MORE MORTAR ROUNDS FELL ON THE SHRINKING NUMBER OF AMERICANS.

FOLLOWED BY MACHINE GUN FIRE AND THE THREAT OF CAPTURE.



DOWN TO *EIGHT* MEN, BAKER AND THE OTHERS KEPT THE ATTACKERS AT BAY.

BUT WITH NO SIGN OF REINFORCEMENTS AND ALMOST OUT OF AMMO, WITHDRAWAL WAS THE ONLY OPTION.



A FRESH SHOWER OF MORTARS REDUCED THEIR NUMBER TO *SEVEN*. A SNIPER MADE IT SIX.

GET THE WOUNDED DOWN THE HILL.

WE WANNA STAY WITH YOU, SIR!

I'M *COVERIN'* YOUR BUTTS. *MOVE OUT!*



TWO MACHINE GUN NESTS THEY HAD BYPASSED NOW BLOCKED THEIR RETREAT.

COVER ME!



THE LIEUTENANT DESTROYED BOTH WITH GRENADES.



THE MEN HAD BEEN IN COMBAT FOR TWELVE CONSECUTIVE HOURS.

BAKER ALONE HAD KILLED NINE ENEMY SOLDIERS.

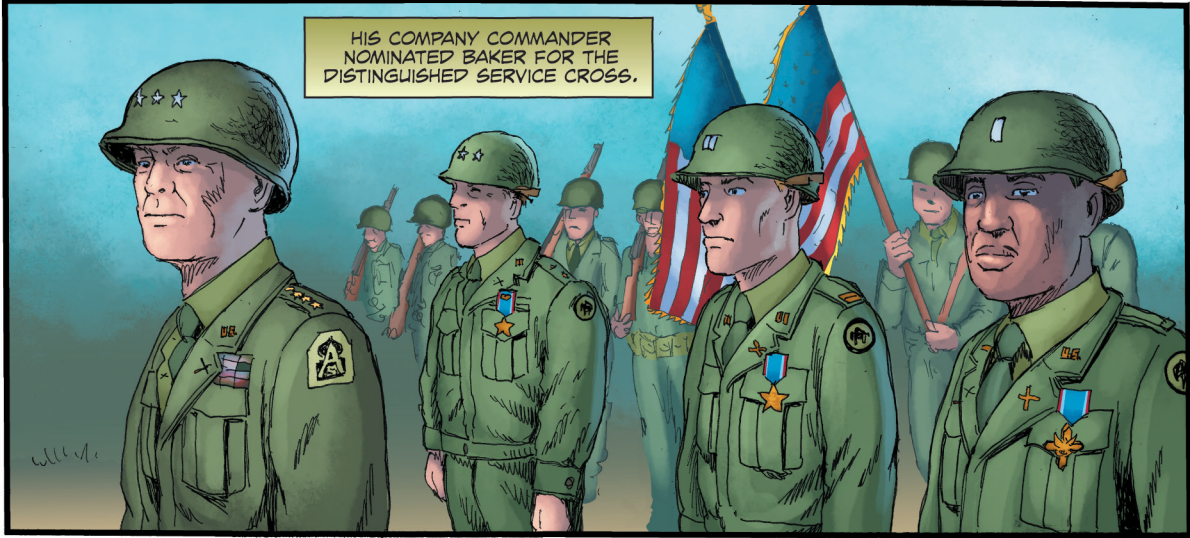
AND ELIMINATED THREE MACHINE GUN NESTS, AN OBSERVATION POST AND A BUNKER.



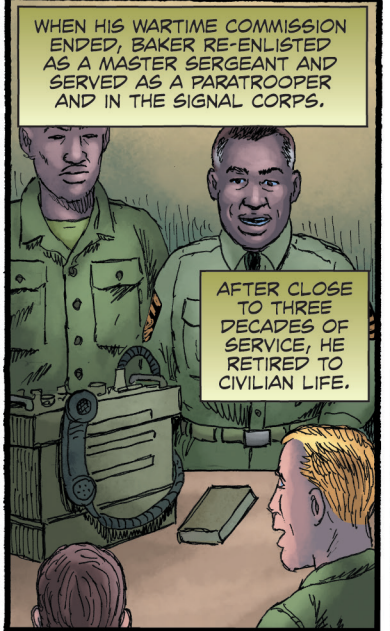
THE PLATOON RETURNED-- BUT THEY HAD PAID A HIGH PRICE.



THE FOLLOWING DAY BAKER LED A FRESH ASSAULT TOWARD THE CASTLE ALONG THE SAME PATH THAT HAD LEFT HIS UNIT SHATTERED.

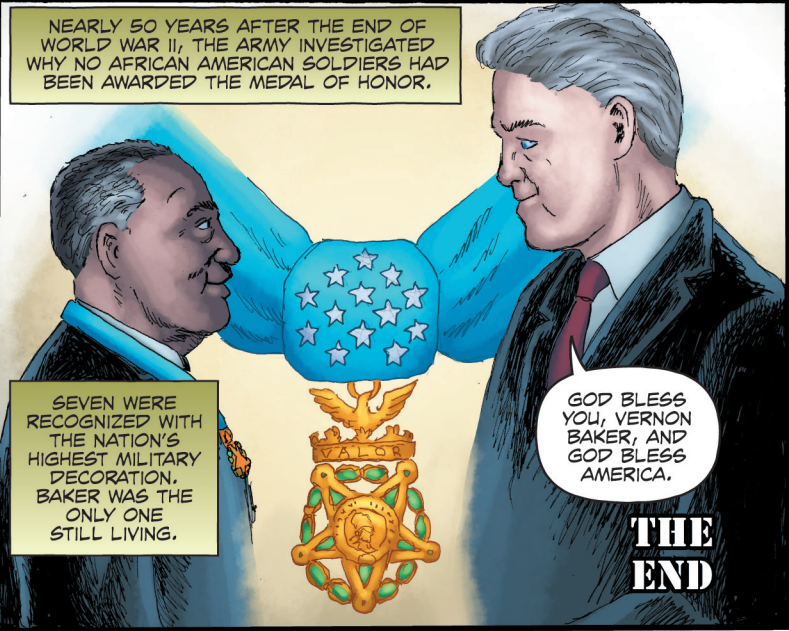


HIS COMPANY COMMANDER NOMINATED BAKER FOR THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS.



WHEN HIS WARTIME COMMISSION ENDED, BAKER RE-ENLISTED AS A MASTER SERGEANT AND SERVED AS A PARATROOPER AND IN THE SIGNAL CORPS.

AFTER CLOSE TO THREE DECADES OF SERVICE, HE RETIRED TO CIVILIAN LIFE.



NEARLY 50 YEARS AFTER THE END OF WORLD WAR II, THE ARMY INVESTIGATED WHY NO AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS HAD BEEN AWARDED THE MEDAL OF HONOR.

SEVEN WERE RECOGNIZED WITH THE NATION'S HIGHEST MILITARY DECORATION. BAKER WAS THE ONLY ONE STILL LIVING.

GOD BLESS YOU, VERNON BAKER, AND GOD BLESS AMERICA.

THE END

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