THERE WERE many famous regiments in World War II, but none received greater recognition and honors than the 100th Battalion and the larger force of which it became a part, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. The 100th Bn and the 442nd RCT stood out from the other units because they were brave, highly motivated, and successful soldiers who were predominately Americans of Japanese ancestry (AJAs) from Hawaii. At a time when Japanese Americans were considered officially suspect by the U.S. government, the sacrifices and proud combat record of these soldiers, mostly in Italy and France, bore testimony to their loyalty and belief in American ideals.

Among the men serving with the AJAs from Hawaii during some of their most difficult and dangerous times was Israel A. S. Yost, a young army chaplain from a small town in Pennsylvania. What follows is the manuscript he wrote in 1984, several years after he retired from the ministry.

Chaplain Yost’s memoir of his time with a battalion of men from Hawaii is the account of an outsider who is able to express his private thoughts candidly about those with whom he served. His request to serve as a combat infantry chaplain led to a chance assignment to the 100th Bn, which was essentially a reconstituted National Guard unit from Hawaii. He soon found himself, a white Lutheran minister, sent to serve as a spiritual adviser to a battalion of young Japanese Americans whose families were overwhelmingly Buddhist. Some had never even heard of the Lutheran faith. A few, because of his first name, assumed he was a rabbi.

Little could Yost have imagined that the 100th Bn would be assigned the role of advance guard in an American military campaign in southern Italy. The men suffered terribly from enemy fire, from unrelenting rain
and snow, from the strain of being in nearly continuous combat, and from some senior white officers who thought of them as expendable.

Yost was with them all the time. He laughed at their jokes in Island pidgin that at first he found incomprehensible. He ate their food. With them he dodged bullets and shrapnel. He listened to their complaints about their officers. He picked them up when they were wounded. He comforted them when they were sad. He put them in body bags when they were dead. He preached Christian sermons in foxholes and tried to interest the men in his faith. From his preaching he won few converts. However, for his unflagging energy and deep concern for his fellow man in a time of nearly unrelenting tragedy he earned the love and devoted admiration of his fellow soldiers.

In this book we meet the future U.S. Senator Spark Matsunaga, librarian Kent Nakamura, future Hawaii Supreme Court Justice Jack Mizuha, dentist Dr. Katsumi Kometani, and others as young men. Yost tells the story of the AJA men and their haole (white) officers such as Farrant Turner, a future secretary of state for the Territory of Hawaii, with empathy, sensitivity, and understanding. The memoir is made up of parts of the journal he kept between 1943 and 1945 as well as excerpts from the letters he wrote home every day to his beloved wife, Peggy.

As a child in eastern Pennsylvania, Israel Yost suffered greatly when his father, a traveling salesman for an agricultural equipment manufacturer, was killed by a drunk driver. He went through trying times as he adjusted to his beloved father’s death and his mother’s struggles as a single parent during the Depression. The protective calluses he developed to survive the hurts of his youth were balanced by an empathy for others’ pain that became a part of his ministry. His sensitivity to others would be severely tested by the brutality of the experiences to which he would bear witness.

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After arriving in North Africa, the men of the 100th Bn had been assigned to General Eisenhower’s command but were told initially that they were not wanted. A place was found for them in the 34th Division of the Fifth Army under the command of Gen. Mark W. Clark. They would serve in Italy under General Clark for all but a few months during the war.

In his book *Calculated Risk*, General Clark described the combat they were up against. “The rain came down in torrents, vehicles were mired
above their hubcaps, the low lands became seas of mud and the German rear guard was cleverly entrenched to delay our progress” (Clark, 226, 228). The terrain of southern Italy is made up of jagged peaks, steep gullies, and narrow mountain valleys usually crossed by rocky mountain trails and narrow roads. When this terrain was defended during a harsh winter by skilled German troops and fortified with concrete forts in three lines of defense with rifle pits, interlocking machine-gun fire, mines, rocket launchers known as Nabelwerfers, tanks, and artillery, it became nearly impregnable.

To the young men from subtropical Hawaii this combat in freezing temperatures was a nightmare. Not only was their unit ill equipped to fight under these kinds of conditions, without winter uniforms or the proper weapons, but their officers also lacked experience and expertise for this kind of combat. It was often said that the men of the 100th had the highest average IQ of any infantry division in the entire U.S. Army. In contrast to the uneducated rural poor who filled much of the ranks of World War II U.S. Army infantry regiments, the 100th was made up of the top AJA high school and college graduates of Hawaii. In a personal war in which they often fought as the advanced guard for the entire Fifth Army, they would need all of their intelligence and cunning to survive. Because of the harsh terrain that made large-scale troop movements difficult, this was a war fought by small units of infantry on both sides in which the most important decisions were made not by generals but by lieutenants, captains, and lieutenant colonels.

It was a dark, difficult, and costly effort that some at that time, and later, would complain had no strategic purpose. The main thrust of the Allied strategy to end World War II against Germany called for two invasions across France: a northern invasion in Normandy called Overlord and an invasion in the south called Dragoon, on the French Riviera. Overlord and Dragoon were years in planning and drew the highest priority in terms of planners, leaders, and materiel.

In comparison to these efforts, the war in Italy was an impromptu campaign never fully planned, never really intended, and fought under a mistaken perception. In 1943, Ultra, the super-secret decrypt of Japanese and German codes, indicated that following the surrender of the Italian government to the Allies in 1943, Adolf Hitler planned to evacuate German troops from Italy. The Allies, it seemed, had only to land in Italy, seize Naples, and take Rome and the war there would be over. They anticipated that they would be welcomed by fervent Italian crowds happy at being liberated.
Expecting minimal resistance, they faced instead a well-trained, ably led, and highly motivated German army intent on their complete destruction. The 100th landed at Salerno on September 22 with 1,300 men. Chaplain Yost would join them on October 5. By the middle of February, he would note that their ranks had been reduced, through almost continuous combat, to 521 soldiers. The 100th was continually reinforced, and their contribution to the war effort was seemingly without end. They would fight in Italy, be sent on a special mission to France, and then, just before the war’s end, be ordered to frontally assault an impregnable mountain fortress in northern Italy.

It must be said that other units suffered severe casualties during World War II, but few (or none) for as long and sustained a duration as the 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Nor did the other units suffer the indignity of having family and friends interned in relocation camps.

By war’s end, Yost, like the men he served with, wanted to go home. He hated violence. He was tired of the army and wanted only to resume life with his wife and loved ones. He went back to Pennsylvania and worked hard at putting the war behind him. His life would be spent as a minister and teacher in service to others. However, he would be forever tied to the people of Hawaii because the bond he forged with the men of the 100th Bn and the 442nd RCT during World War II would never leave him. This book is Yost’s personal testament because he could never let the story go. It was an immensely difficult thing to preach a message of love and compassion in a daily atmosphere of war and brutality. This book is his effort to explain what happened to him during that difficult time. It is a unique window to a past we must never forget.