

Alex Haley crosses the bar

Thousands gather as award-winning author returns home for the last time

In February, the nation celebrated the history of black Americans and their contributions to this country. The nation also mourned the death of one of its great historians and authors.

On Feb. 10, retired Coast Guard Chief Journalist Alex P. Haley died of a heart attack in a Seattle Hospital, leaving behind a legacy of writings and history.

Through his work, he inspired people of all races to explore their pasts and find their family histories.

Haley's most famous writings were *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and

Roots, the saga of an American family.

Haley's funeral was held Feb. 15 at Greenwood Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Memphis, Tenn., where 1,400 family and friends converged on the church for the three-hour vigil that highlighted Haley's accomplishments and his dedication to his work.

Attallah Shabazz, daughter of slain civil rights leader Malcolm X, gave a moving tribute to the man she called *Padrino*, the Spanish word for godfather.

She described him as a man looking forward to dreams and asked

him to say hello to her father.

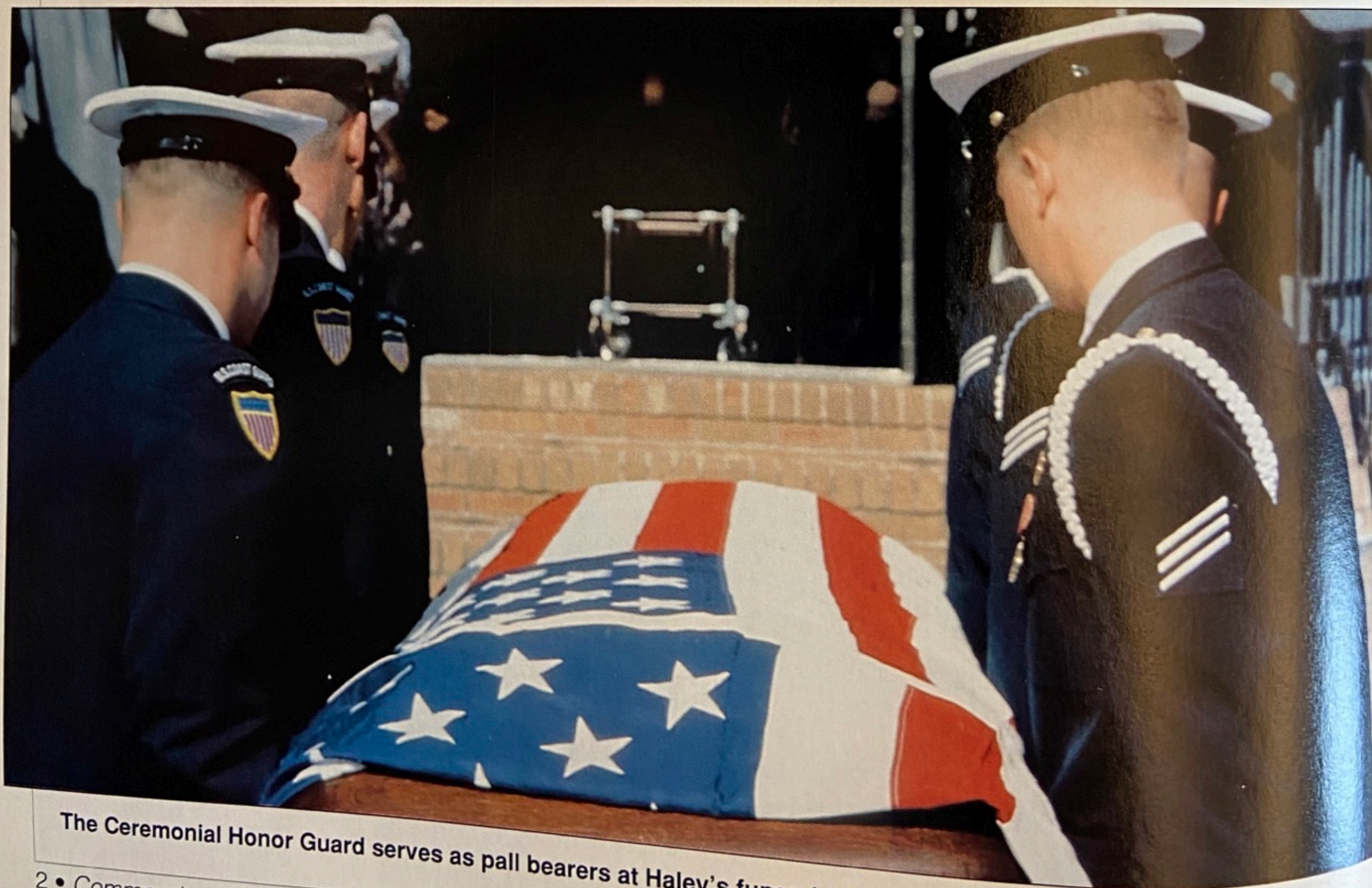
Haley's body was escorted from Seattle to Memphis by YNCS Abe Hinson of the 13th District staff. At the funeral, Hinson was joined by several more Coast Guard district staff members.

Some of Haley's old shipmates also attended the services.

"He was a journalist, he had everything to say about the Coast Guard. He was a great motivator," said retired Chief Supply Clerk Lester W. Reid, who served with Haley in 1956-57 in the old 3rd District.

Standing watch

In addition, the Coast Guard Ceremonial Honor Guard, from Alexandria, Va., stood watch over



The Ceremonial Honor Guard serves as pall bearers at Haley's funeral on Feb. 15. Photo by PA3 W. Scott Epperson



(Above) YNCS Abe Hinson serves as the official escort. (Right) Haley's wife, Myran Haley, accepts Haley's service flag that draped the casket. Photos by PA3 W. Scott Epperson



Haley's African-mahogany casket throughout the funeral. Later they served as pall bearers for the burial in Henning, Tenn.

Approximately 2,500 people and 150 cars made up the procession from Memphis to Henning, Haley's boyhood home.

He was laid to rest in the front yard of the house where he grew up, which is now a state museum.

Also during the service, the honor guard fired a 21-gun salute, and a bugler from the Coast Guard Band played "Taps," paying tribute to the 20 years of service Haley gave to his country and the Coast Guard, both as a steward and as a chief journalist.

During the ceremony Hinson presented Haley's third wife, Myran Haley, with the American flag that draped Haley's casket.

As Haley was lowered into the ground, a flutist played the theme to *Roots*.

At the end of the ceremony, a Djimbe Drum was played for Haley, symbolizing power and unity. The

drum was like the ones used by the Griots, historians in African tribes, according to Kpe Lee, the instrument's handler.

"It is saying 'Allah made him special, to do what he does,'" Lee said.

Although the nation lost one of its great contributors — and the Coast Guard lost one of its longtime shipmates — Haley's writings and inspiration will continue to live long after he has passed.

— PA3 W. Scott Epperson, 2nd Dist.

YNCS Abe Hinson remembers his hero

In 1977, the American public was captivated by the saga of Alex Haley's *Roots*. The discovery and exploration of his family's heritage, intertwined in American history, struck a chord with those who have wondered "where did I come from?"

The Coast Guard had known of Alex Haley long before *Roots*. As the first chief journalist, he became a

mentor to a generation of Coast Guard men and women.

After Haley's death, Hinson accompanied the chief's remains from Seattle to Tennessee.

"When one of your heroes dies, you just don't believe it at first. It was like I was 19 years old again and hearing of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. — I just couldn't believe it," Hinson said.

Prior to the news of his death, Hinson had planned to attend Haley's speaking engagement at the Bangor Naval Base the following day. He said he was anxious to meet the man who had a profound personal and professional influence on his life.

"When I finally heard the truth (about Haley's death), there was an immediate empty feeling in me," said the 43-year-old yeoman.

He said that another emotional moment came later that day when he received orders to serve as the Coast Guard escort of Haley's body to Henning, Tenn.



Alex Haley's life and legacy

Alex Haley was born in Ithaca, N.Y., Aug. 11, 1921, the oldest of three sons. His father was a college professor and his mother was a grammar school

teacher. Although he was born in Ithaca, Haley was raised in Henning, Tenn.

Haley graduated from high school at the age of 15. He completed two years of college before failing a sophomore French class and dropping out of college.

Then, at the urging of his father, he enlisted in the Coast Guard in Elizabeth City, N.C., in 1939. The 17-year-old Haley's early years in the service were spent as a steward onboard the CGC *Mendota* in Portsmouth, Va.

While he was at sea, Haley took up letter writing to keep in touch with his family and friends at the college. During a thriving week at sea, Haley would knock out 40 letters — and receive just as many in return. Seeing his great success at mail call, his fellow sailors sought his help in writing their letters. Soon Haley began writing love letters for his shipmates as well.

While at sea on various cutters, Haley spent countless hours writing sea stories that he recounted from the *old salts* onboard. Eight years and hundreds of rejection slips later, he finally had his first story published.

Then in 1952, after Haley's writing talent was discovered, the Coast Guard created the journalist rating for him. His primary jobs were to write stories and sell the Coast Guard to the media.

After 20 years of service, Haley retired as a chief journalist in 1959.

After retiring, Haley became a freelance journalist for *Reader's Digest* and *Playboy*. He then ventured onto books and published his first, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in 1965.

Haley then spent almost 12 years researching the 200-year history of the maternal side of his family — which later became the *Roots*. He received the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for this 1976 best seller.

Haley went on to be a worldwide lecturer. Never forgetting his own roots in the Coast Guard, he often mentioned his early years in the Coast Guard during his talks.

Never straying far from his service, Haley became the first recipient of an honorary doctorate from the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., in 1989.

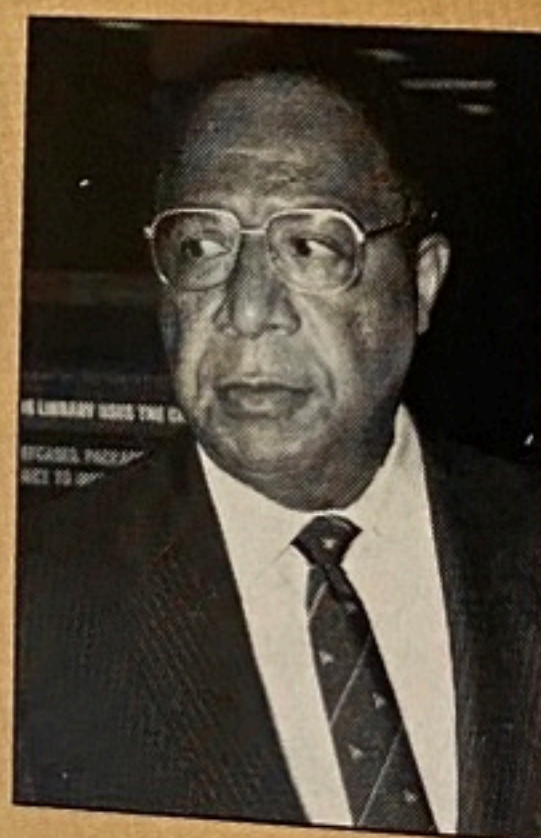
In addition to writing and speaking engagements, Haley was involved in many literacy projects — particularly adult literacy.

He also established a scholarship fund for needy students.

Just as his writing began onboard ships, his love for the sea and the inspiration it provided him continued. For three or four months out of each year, Haley would book passage on a cargo ship — to write.

Haley was working on two more books when he died in Seattle on Feb. 10.

— PA2 Robin J. Thomson, *Bulletin*



"I really felt the need to go. Orders or not, if I had to pay for the trip myself, I would have gone," Hinson said. "As a chief petty officer, I'm wearing the same uniform that he wore. I belonged there," Hinson said.

Reflections

Hinson, with more than 24 years of military service, said that he was in recruiting in 1977 when he found out that the author of *Roots* was a retired Coast Guardsman.

"From that point on, I used Alex Haley as a recruiting role model to get young blacks and hispanics into the Coast Guard," he said.

Hinson identified with Haley's *Roots* very much. Hinson grew up in a little town surrounded by sharecropping tobacco fields in northern Florida. He worked and lived on the owner's property.

"That was just 30 years ago — 30 years ago! That's why I identified so closely with *Roots* and Alex Haley," Hinson said.

Hinson's trip to Haley's small town in Tennessee also came with mixed emotions for him — mourning the loss of someone he admired and feeling pride in representing the service that Haley loved.

Hinson said the people attending the services were glad to see the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard Honor Guard performing the Changing of the Guard routine.

"If Alex Haley could have looked out the corner of his eye, he'd have been proud to see how sharp they were," said Hinson.

Having the Coast Guard there meant a lot to Haley's family as well. Haley's brother George said that he appreciated the Coast Guard being at the funeral and that Alex would have loved the Coast Guard being there, Hinson said.

"That statement had an impact on me, to know that we weren't out of

place and we were in tune with what Alex would have wanted," he said.

The legacy

Both in his life and after his death, Haley left a legacy for all people — one that traces its roots to Haley's early days in the Coast Guard.

Haley never forgot his early roots in the Coast Guard, Hinson said.

"It seems that in every reference of Alex Haley, there is a reference to him having been in the Coast Guard.

It made me feel proud that I am a part of an organization that he was a part of," Hinson said.

"I've met a lot of people that have forgotten where they come from — they've forgotten their roots.

"They might be driving a Mercedes Benz now, but at one time they were driving a Dodge Dart. Haley reminded us not to forget our roots," he said.

In honor of Haley's early roots, Hinson has been working on getting a cutter named after Haley, like

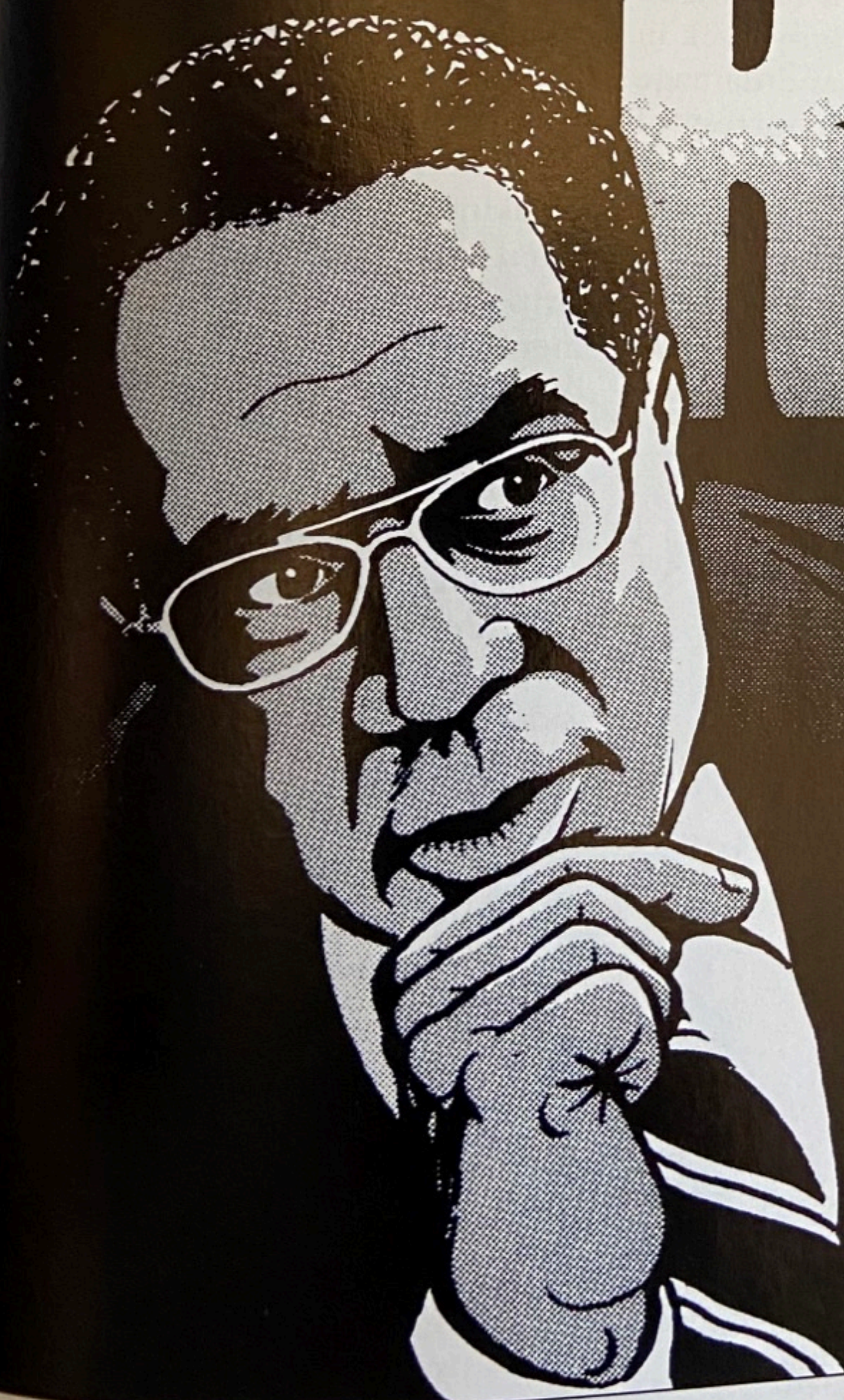
those named for other Coast Guardsmen such as Signalmen First Class Douglas Munro.

Hinson said he believes that although they may not have met each other, Haley and Munro had a lot in common.

"In a way, Alex Haley also gave his life for the Coast Guard, as did Munro," Hinson said. "They were both defenders of freedom. They were both heroes."

— PA2 Dennis Hall, 13th Dist.

ROOTS



Alex Haley
1921-1992

'TIL THAT LAST MUSTER—SEMPER PARATUS, OLD BUDDY
HUGH HAYNIE
©1992 The Courier-Journal