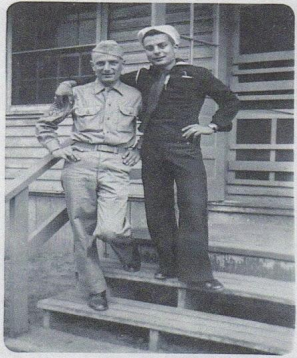




The following is a great story that took place in 2009 in Winnebago, IL. It involves George Church, son of Roy and Helen Church.



George with brother Ted

WWII vet walks with Winnebago High School

After 62 years, George Church will be a 2009 WHS graduate

WINNEBAGO – It only took him 62 years – but George Church will soon catch up with his high school class. The now 81-year-old wasn't able to walk with his Winnebago High School class of 1945 – he decided instead to leave for World War II.

Today, Church might not be feeling the end-of-the-year itch like most students, but his excitement might just top at least some WHS grads. He's called in his cap and gown sizes and soon, he will be attending practice to walk with this year's class at 3 p.m. May 17.

Through the state Department of Veterans Services, any World War II or Korean War Veteran who was drafted prior to their high school graduation is eligible for a diploma. In 2008 the General Assembly passed Senate Bill 2682, which allows local school boards to award high school diplomas to Vietnam War veterans as well.

Church was born in Winnebago on Pecatonica Street and the area still somehow feels like home — even though he spent most of his adult life living in Rockford. While in high school, he spent most of his time working, since companies needed employees while most men were off to war.

It was actually Church's grandson, Jason, who was graduating from high school in Arizona when Church made the comment to him that he was always sorry he'd never graduated. The issue, overheard by his son, was dropped for a while – but when Church's daughter, Debbie's son, Zack interviewed Church again for an English paper, the issue surfaced again.

Hearing the thought from her father for the second time piqued Debbie's interest just enough to check into it. She knew of an acquaintance in Seward and asked if she had any connection to Winnebago High School. She did, and Winnebago's Supt. Dennis Harezlak just happened to be the principal where Debbie's daughter used to attend school.

"It's like this was all really meant to happen," Debbie said.

After talking to Harezlak, a family reunion was planned for mid-January in Arizona and Church was given a beautiful certificate in front of family, letting him know he would officially receive his diploma, and could walk with the class of 2009.

"I couldn't believe it," Debbie said of her father's reaction. "Rarely is my Dad speechless." Church's wife, Annie, was also touched by the gesture. The couple has been married for 58 years and Church says she's been his strength.

Enlisting

Since Church was well aware he would be enlisted to the war after his graduation, he decided instead to join the Navy in order to choose where he was going. He enlisted against his parents wishes the day after Christmas in 1944 before his graduation. His oldest brother, Ted, was in the Army then and wrote to their parents asking them to let his brother choose where he was going to avoid getting drafted.

The 17-year-old headed for boot camp in Great Lakes for eight weeks and was part of a group of 40 men taken alphabetically to Lighter Than Air and sent them out on Navy Air Ships, or Blimps. From there, he went to New Jersey.



"I was lucky to be part of that group," Church said, noting that others were sent to California and eventually faced heavy combat.

Soon, Church was in North Carolina and worked as an engine mechanic on a blimp. It was a job he loved immediately. "It got me a taste of aviation," Church said with a smile.

He spent 18 months in the service and the war ended the summer after he enlisted. He was discharged and then re-enlisted for four years of inactive duty, serving a total of 5-and-a-half years in the Navy.

At that time, some of the servicemen were heading back to high school for their diploma, but Church said he didn't want to do that – he was more interested in continuing his aviation career. "I wanted to fly," he said.

Valuing education

Although he wasn't planning to head back to high school, Church valued education and it was important he stay educated. Over the years, he's attended more than 10 schools, beginning with the Currey School of Aeronautics in Galesburg, Ill., which he attended for a year-and-a-half and received his Airframe, Engines and Private Pilot Certificates. From there, Church would fly for Sundstrand Corporation in Rockford serving as a Pilot and Corporate Manager of Aircraft Maintenance for more than three decades. At his retirement, he continued to work as a self-employed consultant and stayed busy with mostly out-of-state companies.

Among his highest achievements is his FAA Charles Taylor Master Mechanic Award, when his name was placed in the Charles Taylor roll of honor in Washington DC and on the Charles Taylor Memorial at the Octave Chanute Aerospace Museum in Rantoul, Ill.

"Flying gets in your blood," Church said. "It's all I wanted to do."

His children: Debbie (Gary) Larson, Rockford; Alan (Roberta) Church, Arizona; and David (Gina) Church, Florida are truly proud of their father for his life's accomplishments and plan to attend the graduation ceremony they otherwise wouldn't have been able to.

"I felt like I was a dropout," Church said. "But when I use that word, my family comes down on me – they don't see me like that."

Church will be celebrating with a graduation party after the ceremony at Debbie's home in Rockford.

Reprint from The Gazette, Pecatonica, IL