

After all these years

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

■ Veterans to receive high school diplomas at CCHS graduation

BUTLER — “I’ve waited nearly 50 years for this,” says Thomas Horn of Lisman. “I’m really excited.”

For Horn and seven other local men, Friday evening will be a night to remember, the night when they are awarded a recognition that has been missing all of their lives — since the day when they left home to answer their nation’s call.

When the Choctaw County High School Class of 2007 takes their walk across the stage on Friday evening, they will not be alone. Preceding them in their caps and gowns will be eight local veterans — heroes who have waited more than half a century to don their caps and gowns, to walk the stage in front of family and friends, and to take hold of the diplomas they never received.

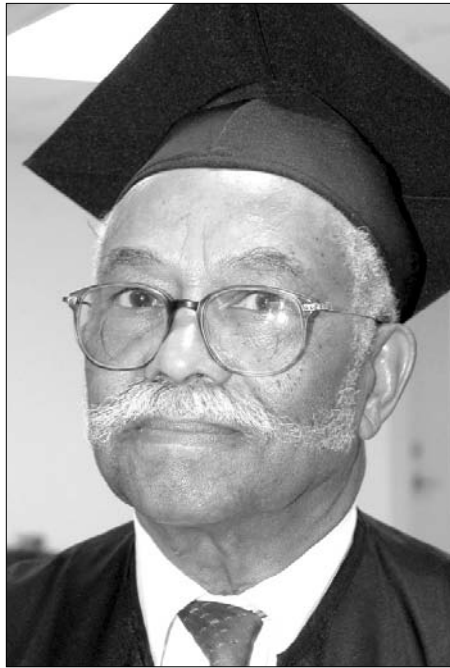
When millions of young men and women left home to serve in World War II, they left behind jobs, families, homes, and loved ones. Less than a decade later, millions more left for Korea, leaving behind treasures much the same.

And scores of those who served in those wars also left behind their chance to complete their high school education. While many returning veterans eventually completed their educations, others were unable to do so.

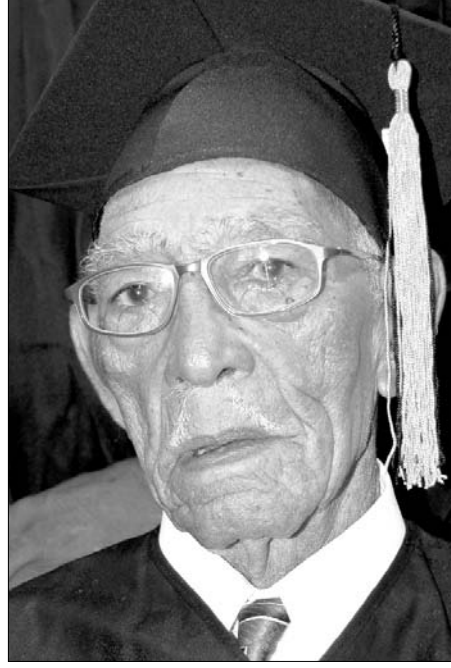
But over the past few years, thousands of veterans across the country have been awarded honorary diplomas, courtesy of the U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs and the Departments of Education in states in which they live.

In Alabama, ‘Operation Recognition’ was signed into law in 2001 by then-Governor Don Siegelman. Act 2001-345 made it possible for the state to grant a high school diploma to any World War II veteran who was not able to complete their high school curriculum. The law was later amended to include veterans of the Korean War as well.

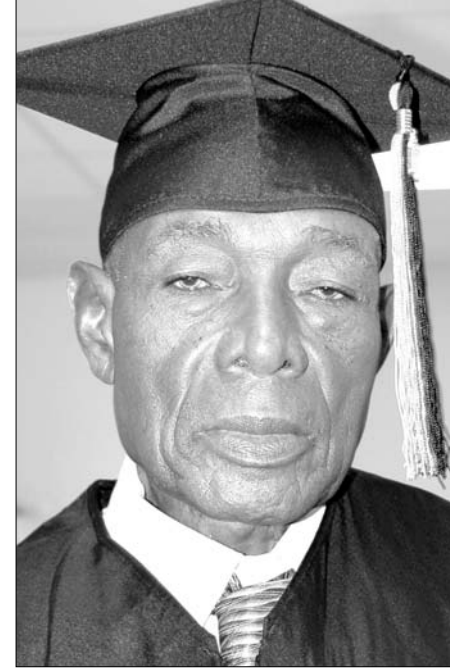
This year will mark the first year since the bill’s enactment that Choctaw County veterans have been honored through Operation Recognition. Through the efforts of VFW Post 5848 in Lisman and its Senior Vice-Commander Linda Turner-Gaines, as well as



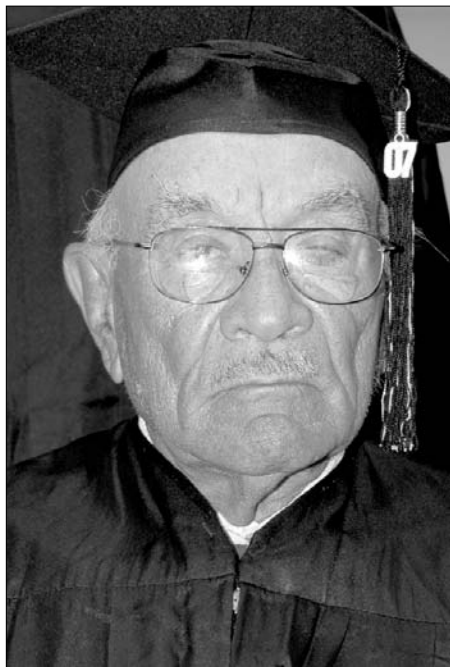
Korean War veteran Thomas Horn



WWII veteran George Minor



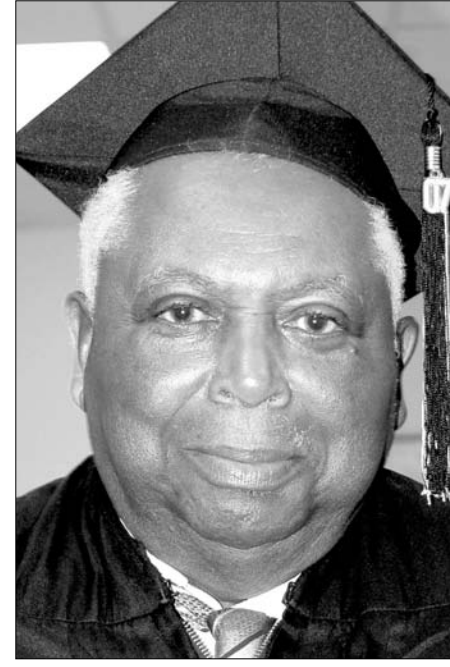
WWII veteran S.J. Austin



Korean War veteran M. C. Barnwell



WWII veteran Calvin Wright

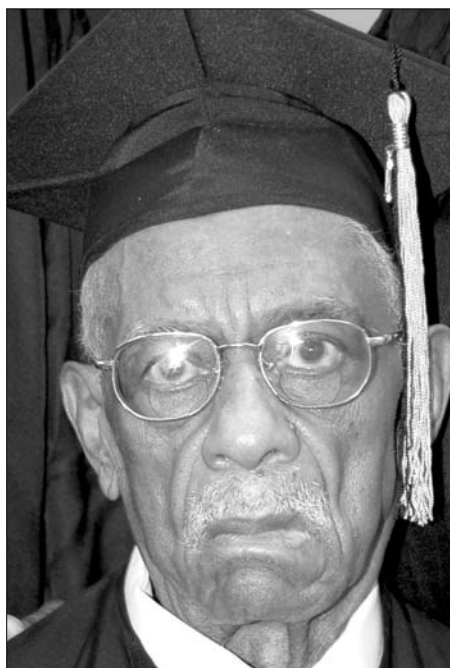


WWII veteran Gabriel Campbell

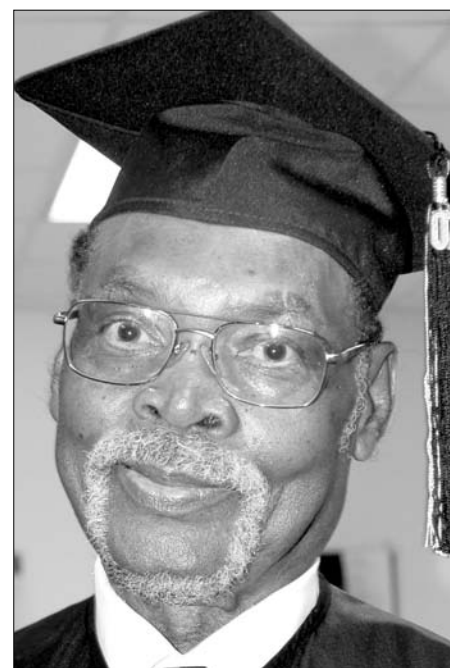
Choctaw Co. Superintendent of Education Sue Moore and CCHS principal Kevin Howard, the men will be recognized during Friday evening’s commencement exercises at CCHS.

Among the honored graduates will be WWII veteran S.J. Austin. A native of Yantley, Austin was drafted in June of 1943 to serve with the 998th Salvage Collection Company.

For over 2 years, he served his country overseas, serving in campaigns in Normandy, Northern France, and Ardennes.



WWII veteran Goardrow Jackson



Korean War veteran Willie Winston

Lisman joined the U.S. Army in March 1941, serving for nearly six years during World War II.

“I volunteered when I was 18,” Minor says. “I was a gun commander. When I came back, I volunteered for another year.”

Minor was honorably discharged and returned home to Choctaw County in December, 1946, but he, too, never received his diploma.

“When I was drafted, I went to Germany for 12 months,” recalls Morris C. Barnwell of Lisman who was drafted into the U.S. Army in January of 1952 during the Korean War.

As part of the 38th Engineering Brigade, Barnwell reached the rank of Corporal. His service earned him the Occupational Medal and the National Defense Service Medal.

Barnwell only completed 2 years of high school.

Korean War veteran Willie E. Winston entered the U. S. Air Force in August, 1952, leaving home at only 19 years of age.

“I was a cook,” he says with a smile. “I was sent to Japan.”

Rhineland, and Central Europe. His efforts earned him the WWII Victory Medal and the European-African-Middle Eastern Service Medal with a Silver Star.

Austin returned home in December, 1945, but he was never able to complete his high school education.

U.S. Navy veteran Gabriel Campbell also left home without finishing high school.

“I left shortly after my 18th birthday,” Campbell remembers. “I served for 2 years, 2 months, and 6 days.”

During WWII, Campbell reached the rank of Steward’s Mate First Class. He was honorably discharged in December, 1945.

George Minor of

Winston served overseas for 3 years and 11 months, returning home in July, 1956. His service earned him the National Defense Service Medal, but he never received his high school diploma.

At only 16 years of age, Goardrow Jackson of Cromwell entered the U.S. Marine Corps in May of 1944, serving as a munitions worker in the Asiatic Pacific area. Jackson was stationed in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, during the volatile years following the Japanese attack on the island. Reaching the rank of corporal, he returned home in July, 1946.

Battle of the Bulge survivor Calvin Wright of Land was part of the 137th Regiment in the 35th Infantry Division. He served in the midst of heavy combat in France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg.

Injured twice during his service, Wright suffered frost bite during combat in the Battle of the Bulge, nearly losing both feet. His valor earned him the Purple Heart, among other medals.

Although Wright did earn his GED when he returned from the war, he never got the opportunity to participate in a high school graduation ceremony.

For Thomas Horn, being drafted into the U.S. Army at 19 meant spending a year and a half working as Heavy Vehicle Operator in the 5th Infantry Division during the Korean War. Stationed in Alaska, Horn reached the rank of SP3 before returning home with a Good Conduct Medal in September 1956.

Upon their return home after their service, several of the veterans returned to sweethearts left behind during the war, to farms and jobs and a re-establishment of civilian life. But their lives, they say, would never be the same. They would be forever changed by the events, the sights, and the sounds of their wartime service.

Throughout their lives, they have remembered those days of service, often telling unimagined stories about the combat and courage, the fighting and the fear that are an inevitable part of war. Some of their stories would earn them medals for their willingness to serve when their nation called them.

On Friday evening, surrounded by family and friends from near and far, the veterans will receive another treasured recognition for their service. For some, their high school diplomas may perhaps be the last missing pieces of their past.

While some will walk alone across the stage, others will share the moment with a family member or friend who will escort them.

“My granddaughter will be walking with me,” says George Minor. “She’s a veteran, too. She served in Iraq.”

Whether they walk alone or with the help of a loved one, the veteran graduates will be remembered as extraordinary members of the Class of 2007 — members who merely had to wait a half a century to get there.

“It feels good to get this,” Minor expresses the sentiments shared by the others. “It feels real good.”

“It feels good to get this.”

-- George Minor

Hat's Off
Graduates -
“Congratulations Brooke”
Hardee's of Butler
Hardee's

Congratulations
2007
Graduates
Commissioner
Dandy Brown
District 1

Congratulations,
Veterans!
We salute you!
The Choctaw Sun