Marie and Henry Prunier AP’40, ’46 have been married for 61 years.
History Intervened

Henry Prunier AP’40 Receives 1946 Assumption College Degree in 2011

BY TROY WATKINS

Henry A. Prunier, was just 20 years old in 1942 when he enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight in World War II. Prunier had been class president at Assumption Prep, and had completed three years of his course work at Assumption College with a bright future ahead. But the war was raging across Europe, North Africa, Southeast Asia and the Philippines and Prunier volunteered to do his duty.

Prunier, like all his classmates at Assumption College of that era, was fluent in French, and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency, took notice and recruited him. They sent him to learn Vietnamese at the University of California at Berkeley.

In 1945 Henry was assigned as a translator to a seven-man OSS team deployed to train the Viet Minh in their fight against the Japanese, who were occupying Viet Nam. Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, names that became very familiar to Americans during the Viet Nam War, were the leaders of the Viet Minh and allied with the U.S. and China against the Japanese. The OSS “Deer Team” lived and worked with the Viet Minh for three months.

“We helped form a guerilla troop to harass the Japanese with subversion – to knock out communications and blow up railroad tracks to prevent the Japanese from entering China,” said Prunier. The Deer Team’s covert operation was classified as confidential up until 2010.

Prunier returned home in 1945 and completed another semester of courses at Assumption College before leaving college to work in the family’s brick and concrete contracting business, J. S. Prunier & Sons, in Worcester. Prunier married, raised a family, and ran the business for 40 more years before disbanding it upon his retirement in 1990.

This past February, Prunier was honored when he received the Bronze Star Medal for his heroic service during WWII in a private ceremony at his home in Auburn, Mass. An article about this ceremony in the Worcester Telegram & Gazette brought Prunier to the attention of Assumption College officials. His story included the fact he had never received his Assumption College degree, a situation he still regretted. The College reviewed his transcript and academic credentials, including his course work at California-Berkeley and the bachelor’s degree he had.
earned at University of Massachusetts. They determined that he had fulfilled the requirements to receive a bachelor’s degree from Assumption.

So, at the age of 89, Prunier was contacted by Assumption President Francesco Cesareo and invited to participate in this year’s Commencement Exercises in May and receive his 1946 degree. “It was one of the greatest things that happened to me in my life,” Prunier said. At the Commencement, Prunier received a standing ovation by the 4,000 people in attendance.

Prunier and his family are thrilled and a bit overwhelmed by all the attention he received concerning his graduation from Assumption. “It’s a real honor,” he said. “I never expected to get it. My degree from Assumption means so much to me because I spent my formative years there. I can’t tell you how special this is – I think it is more significant to me than receiving the Bronze Star earlier this year.”

Prunier is the second member of his family to receive a degree from Assumption College. His father, Henry E. Prunier, received an honorary degree from the College in 1955 for his philanthropic support of Assumption Prep and Assumption College. Among the other honorary degree recipients that year was Senator John F. Kennedy, who also gave the Commencement address. Senator Kennedy visited Worcester and Assumption College the day after the devastating tornado of 1953 destroyed the Assumption campus. The Kennedy family made a significant gift that summer that enabled the College to buy the farmland on Salisbury Street for the new campus.

As John Gardner said, “History never looks like history when you are living through it.” Prunier and his wife of 61 years, Mariette, raised six children and have 12 grandchildren and two great-grandsons. They reside in an assisted living facility in Auburn. Prunier is considered a hero in Vietnam. His U.S. Army uniform hangs in a prominent place in Hanoi’s Military History Museum with several of his war medals, letters and documents that he donated a couple years ago.

Prunier describes Ho Chi Minh as “a soft-spoken, very intelligent man. He loved the people and they loved him. He was admired like a favorite grandfather.” Minh later became prime minister and president of

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Vietnam. Among his current possessions, Prunier treasures a silk tapestry embroidered with oriental war gods that a grateful Ho Chi Minh presented to him in 1945.

President Cesareo stated, “Mr. Prunier is a model of someone who had the Assumption experience and was able to take that experience and do things for the betterment of society and the world.”

Prunier concluded, “I hope that I’ve been an inspiration to some younger people. I’m trying to instill in them a desire to better themselves and I think I’ve helped out a little bit in that respect.”