



## Meeting the Masters: Albert C. Church, Jr., part 2

Over 50 years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.

How Shihan Church maintained his jocular disposition despite his administrative responsibilities was beyond me. That was one of the non-martial things I learned from him, and still need to practice.

My roommate Curt Richardson and I had just driven 1000 miles to visit the Kamishin Hombu dojo to practice aiki. We finally located Scott St. in Charleston Heights and parked in a dirt lot across from a converted army barracks that was now serving as the two-floor *hombu* dojo. The training was just ending as we approach the building. A black belt, Garner “Skip” Train, was exiting the building, and let us know that Shihan Church had left earlier. Skip was kind enough to talk to us about karate kata for a while before confirming that we’d have to return the next night. He was friendly although we could still feel a sense of his protecting his instructor from outsiders.

I was frustrated to say the least at not having met Shihan Church right away, but it was no one’s fault and luckily, he had given me his work phone so the next morning I called. I was impressed that the head of the system was going to pick us up in his Cadillac and transport us to lunch. We would of course reciprocate by picking up the tab. Or so I had planned. Evidently, I had made a good initial impression (knowing a few Japanese terms and a few kanji helped a lot), so half-smiling, half-laughing, Soke Church insisted on paying for us.

Shihan Church had left practice earlier than expected the night before because he had been working on a case where an enlisted guy was accused of having an affair with an officer’s wife. It was a mixed-race situation and Shihan Church had wanted to find the accused simply to keep him safe. It was a very, very serious matter, but he managed to keep a smile on his face while retelling it.

Several years later, I took a contingency of students to visit the new hombu on Savannah Highway. I didn’t know then, but Shihan Church had gotten out of a sick bed to be with us, taking time to throw around my student Bruce Hall and myself so we would get the experience of his chuckling as we managed to fly to avoid the pain of his locks. I asked him if he were

laughing at us or with us. “You know, son, in my experience all the masters used to laugh when they threw. You know why? Because it works.” Well, I don’t know about *all* the masters that Shihan Church had experienced, but certainly this master’s smiling face made everything look easy. But his jocularity was more than celebrating effortless technique. When it was my turn to demonstrate in order to be evaluated by him, I chose as *uke* Steve Miller, my biggest student (outweighing me by 60 pounds). I spun him, locked him, took him down, and flicked him away only to have the big guy’s foot smash through the sheetrock of the dojo’s back wall. The *dojo-cho*, Gary Goodrich was not amused, but Shihan Church could not stop laughing. Years before, he said, he had thrown big “Jonesy”, one of his senior students, through the wall back in the old Scott St. dojo. “One foot sticking out into the Carolina night.”

Shihan Church’s personal example taught me as much about being a “master instructor” as his techniques did.