**Howard Ward**: Leadership, Race and the Meaning of “Welcome Home”

U.S. Air Force • Vietnam era, 1963–1967

Howard Ward grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, where he remembered a close-knit Black community, family guidance, and a love of football. After high school, he accepted an athletic scholarship to Tennessee State University. His time in the South introduced him to forms of racial segregation that contrasted with his upbringing. Ward ultimately turned to an earlier plan to join the U.S. Air Force, beginning his service in 1963.

In training at Amarillo, Texas, Ward recalled becoming the first Black leader of his squadron, a “Yellow Rope and Whistle” position with responsibility for other airmen when instructors were absent. He also recalled leading a parade as a guidon bearer. For Ward, leadership meant being entrusted with responsibility and being judged by his capabilities. But his memories were not uncomplicated. When asked about racism in the military, he acknowledged a traumatic experience and explicitly declined to share its details. That boundary is part of his testimony and deserves respect.

Ward later worked in aircraft maintenance in connection with Air Force operations in Vietnam, including at Bien Hoa. His interview makes the technical, behind-the-scenes work of war visible: aircraft had to be inspected, maintained and prepared so pilots could complete their missions. Ward’s detailed memories show that military service involves countless people whose work seldom appears in familiar images of combat.

Long after leaving the Air Force, Ward continued to reflect on wartime loss, the challenges of returning to civilian life, and the importance of recognition. He moved to the Las Vegas area in 2003. An Honor Flight visit to military memorials in Washington, D.C., in 2023 prompted especially strong emotions. Ward explained that the phrase that mattered most to him was not simply thanks for serving, but “welcome home.” His story invites visitors to ask what a community owes veterans beyond public ceremonies—and how race, memory, service and belonging intersect across a lifetime.

**Source** Howard Ward, oral history with Barbara Tabach, June 29 and August 31, 2023; Veterans’ Voices: We’re Listening (UNLV, 2024).

Transcript

**From Jet Mechanics to Segregation in the South**

Source: UNLV, Veterans' Voices: We're Listening · Ward_Howard_2 Book.pdf · PDF pp. 24–26 (printed interview pp. 10–12) 707

**INTERVIEWER** When you made yourself available for the Air Force, did you get to tell them what kind of job you wanted?

**VETERAN** No, no. Actually, it's your aptitude test, at that time, places you what type of job that you're going to do. The funny thing about it is my buddy Daryl who joined–I joined because of him–was a heck of a better auto mechanic than me. We both came out of Tech as certified welders. But I thought I wanted to be a welder. I didn't know. I wanted to be a welder, right? Here is what happened. He got put in the fire department. Me, Air Force jet mechanic. He was scared to death of little fires. I think he got sent to Lincoln where they had the KC-135s, which supported Offutt, the B-52s. His first fire, he told me, "We went out on the fire in KCs. See all the flames coming up out of there. I'm sitting there looking at the fire. The sergeant said, 'Get your butt out there. What are you doing looking around here? You're supposed to fight the fire.'" That was him. In my opinion—but he did what was right for him. He stayed 20 years. His first 10 was firefighting. He flipped over to the air traffic controller. When he got out, he was too old to go into either one of them. Too old to get in the fire department, and too old for an air traffic controller.

**INTERVIEWER** That's a shame. Basic training, what do you remember about your first day of basic training or getting to basic training?

**VETERAN** My buddy will love this. ... They flew us in from Nashville, and we stopped in Little Rock, which was very...You would understand this, maybe, Barbara. Coming from Des Moines, Iowa, I went to Tennessee, Nashville. Nashville is one of the first cities in the South to segregate. Even at the bus stations, you could see the "Black only" water fountain, the white enamel. When you put your hand to turn it on, it was dang near as black as the top you're wearing from handprints and never cleaned it. Leaving there, '62, we landed to get fuel or people in Little Rock, which was very racist at the time. Especially going to school, Central High. To a point, I was like, wow, because there was another little incident I'll share with you later, just the significance of Little Rock, Arkansas. And luckily, I didn't have to get off the plane because I'm like, wow, okay, how are we going to do this? This was my first experience with prejudice on this level. But anyway, my other experience was when I went down to Tennessee State, the spring football, but I was always trying to get on a track scholarship. That being said, my buddy told me they went down to a school and the southern stuff that they experienced. Well, I got to go on one of the track deals. I wasn't on

the track scholarship, but I got to ride and handle equipment and stuff. We stopped at someplace there in northern Mississippi, I think in the tip of Mississippi, yes, and went to the gas station because we had three station wagon cars. We got back in the car, and the coach said, “Now, if you have to go to the bathroom. We’re not going to be stopping until we get to Louisiana.” We jumped out. There was a sign as big as your wall, “Clean restrooms.” There was a white guy there that had these bib overalls on and the old blue stripe with the gray bib overalls. One of them had chewing tobacco he was spitting down in front of him. We got out and went to the bathroom. “Where you boys going?” “We’re going to the restroom.” “Ain’t got no restroom.” “Sir, there’s a sign.” “I said we ain’t got no restrooms.” So, okay, we got back in the car. We went out down the road, and there was a cotton field out there, and they had a sign on the road that was very derogatory, “No so-and-so, N word, trespassing.” Our revenge was that we urinated on the sign.