

# Profiles in Leadership

## Wendell G. Freeland

*Former Tuskegee Airman began his successful flight at Howard.*

By Raven Padgett

A \$250 academic scholarship brought Wendell G. Freeland (B.A. '47) to Howard to study history and political science. It was a world apart from the one in which he had grown up, just 90 minutes away in Baltimore.

"Before I won the scholarship, I didn't even think about attending college," says Freeland, now 87. "I was 16 years old, a poor kid from Baltimore, coming to this beautiful campus to study under these great men and women. I felt privileged. It was a wonderful experience."

And while his service during World War II temporarily took him away from the Hilltop, a desire to study under luminaries such as Frank Snowden and Rayford Logan drew him back. The civil rights attorney and former Tuskegee Airman credits his time at Howard with shaping him into the leader he is today.

Once a member of the *Hilltop* newspaper's editorial board, Freeland showed early signs of the activism that would define his law career. The intellectual discourse that was prevalent on campus and

the guidance from his professors allowed him to flourish.

But there was a war going on and Freeland wanted to help end fascism, so after studying at Howard for two years, he joined the Army Air Corps in 1943. He soon found himself part of the Tuskegee Airmen, an experimental program introduced in 1941 to train Black pilots. Freeland trained as a navigator and a bombardier and was sent to Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), home base for the newly trained aviators.

As a member of the famed Airmen, Freeland served as a lieutenant and flew B-25s with the 477th Bombardment Group.

The Black pilots flew dozens of missions and soared in the air, but back on the ground, they couldn't escape the racism that challenged their intellect and bravery. Freeland was determined to help eliminate injustice whenever he saw it, something he says he learned from his Howard professors.

### Civil Disobedience

In 1945, Freeland's unit was transferred to Freeman Field, Ind. The armed forces were still segregated, so when he and other soldiers tried to integrate an all-White officer's club, they were arrested. After refusing to sign papers that would acknowledge acceptance of the segregated policies, Freeland and his comrades were charged with mutiny, which came with the penalty of death. The charges were eventually dropped, but the historical significance can't be denied—the resistance became known as the Freeman Field Mutiny and helped set the stage for the sit-ins during the civil rights movement.

Just 20 years old at the time, Freeland says his time at Howard had already colored his notion of when to stand up and when to speak up.

"I don't know if it was the courage of youth, but I was definitely buttressed by my experience at Howard," he says. "We considered ourselves the best and brightest, so we were going to act that way in life."

For Freeland, being part of the Freeman Field Mutiny was the beginning of what would become a lifetime of fighting injustice and racial discrimination. After the war ended, he returned to Howard, where he graduated *cum laude*. He earned his law degree from the University of Maryland, then moved to Pittsburgh and began practicing in 1951.

In the early 1950s, he successfully sued the city of Pittsburgh to legally integrate the swimming pool at the city's main municipal park. And over the years, he has built a career on helping clients whose voices are often misunderstood or ignored. More recently,



Freeland saw success in a case that was 150 years old. After reading an article in a law magazine about George Vashon, the first African American to graduate from Oberlin College and the first Black professor at Howard University, whose application for the Pennsylvania bar was rejected in 1847 and 1868, Freeland decided to take on the case. He petitioned the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to overturn the ruling on behalf of the Vashon family and, in 2010, the court posthumously admitted Vashon to the bar.

"I consider these two cases the bookends to my career," says Freeland.

Through the years, he has been an active leader in his field, serving as senior vice president of the National Urban League and president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the Urban League.

In 2007, he and his "fly boy" brothers received the Congressional Gold Medal from President George W. Bush. In January 2008, he and a group of Airmen were personally invited to attend the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Freeland traveled to Washington, D.C., and on that brisk January morning when Obama took the oath of office, a flood of emotions overtook him.

"It was the most exhilarating and poignant moment of my life," says Freeland. "For many of us who are in our 70s and 80s, his election showed just how far we had come, how much we had fought for."

Freeland says he saw *Red Tails*, a movie about the Airmen, earlier this year (Chas "Charles" Floyd Johnson, B.A. '62; J.D. '65, served as co-producer), and was gratified knowing that more people—regardless of race and age—would understand more fully the experiences of the Airmen. He was especially happy that a new generation could learn about their leadership and courage.

"It's important for young people, like Howard students, to see this and know that we were the same age as they are today when we broke these barriers," he says.

Freeland adds: "For us, we had an obligation to civil rights and to carry on the tradition of Howard of being leaders in our fields. At the time, we were taught that Howard was the 'Capstone for Negro education' so we tried to uphold that in our lives and in whatever we were striving to do." ■HU

*Padgett is editor of Howard Magazine.*