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# CHAHTA SIA HOKE

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*Living out the Chahta Spirit  
of Faith, Family and Culture.*

# *Patriot, Hero, Father*

Willard Leroy Ward was living in Houston in 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Even though he had just been discharged from the Army four months earlier, news of the attack made him want to re-enlist. This time, though, Ward thought he would like to try the Air Force. “The planes were the way to go!” said Ward. He thought that was the best option to winning the war.

He went to an Air Force recruiter in Houston and was turned away because he weighed six pounds too much. Not to be denied his patriotic dream, Ward jogged for hours to get his weight down. After dehydrating himself six pounds, he met the weight limit and was signed up as a member of the United States Air Force, beginning his 20-year career in that service.

Wanting to see action in the air, Ward trained and worked hard to become an expert gunner. He shipped out in 1943 when the 8th Air Force deployed to Europe and served as a waist gunner on a B-17 aircraft called “The Spirit of America.” This means he was the gunner on the left side or “blind” side of the pilot, a critical position.

Casualties were high during WWII—very few airmen finished 25 missions, which was the length of one tour. After finishing his first 25 missions, Ward signed up for a second tour, finishing another 16—a total of 43 missions. On July 4, 1943, Ward was wounded when he was hit in the chest with shrapnel from a 20 mm. He lay on the floor of the plane in a pool of blood for a bit, but knowing the pilot, his crew and America were depending on him, Ward pulled himself back to his post and manned his gun to fire on the Germans. He earned three medals that one day—a Silver Star, a Purple Heart, and a Distinguished Flying Cross.

Other military awards displayed in Ward’s home from his tours include a U.S. Air Medal,

Good Conduct Medal, American Defense Medal and a WWII Victory Medal. The back of the Victory Medal reads, “Freedom from Fear and Want—Freedom of Speech and Religion.” He also has a Distinguished Unit Citation.

“I made a few missions,” says Ward humbly, “Those were some rough times. I still have some lead in me,” said Ward. “They got most of it out.” Credited for a confirmed hit in 1945, shooting down an Me109, Ward has told the story of the German plane that slid across and turned right in front of his gun barrel. Ward is quoted as saying, “I let him have it full force and he exploded!”

He prefers to focus on good and fun memories, like having Clark Gable as a member of the 8th Air Force. “We could follow him into town and the girls would flock to him. We could always get attention from his leftovers,” laughed Ward. Other famed pilots in the 8th Air Force included Jimmy Stewart and Tom Landry. Those who flew together bonded. He became best friends, “like brothers,” with a gunner from the ball turret on the B-17, Herman Molen. An interview videoed in 1995 can be seen on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) under the title “B-17 Display Reunites World War II Buddies.”

One of Ward’s best memories bringing a twinkle to his eye is talking about his “Beautiful Maxine,” who he met after coming home from the war. Maxine caught his eye while she was working at a soda fountain. They were married in 1946, raised four children and joyously celebrated their 62nd anniversary before she went on to be with the Lord.

He and Maxine loved the beach and made a trip to the Bahamas once, although family vacations to Galveston were about as far as they wanted to travel most of the time. After all, he had been based in England and flown over Europe. He had seen a lot of the world.

Dennis Ward, Leisa Kirby and Vicky Letson surround their beloved father, “Choctaw Bill.”







It was good to focus on family and home. Two sons and two daughters (Dennis, Don, Vicky and Leisa) enriched their lives. Ward also has three grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

Ward retired from the Air Force as a Master Sergeant, and his civilian career was a lineman for Texas Power and Light. He had an especially exciting day on the job when he was at the top of a pole in Centerville working on a transformer and the pole broke off at the ground. "I rode that pole all the way down!" The accident dislocated his shoulder, but didn't damage his spirit or his good attitude.

What hobbies interest Ward? A large garden was important at the Ward place. "Choctaw Bill," as he likes to be called, kept up with the garden out back and the yard work until a few years ago. He is also a champion at crossword puzzles. He worked three a day (from the Dallas Morning News, Palestine Herald Press and the Tyler Morning News) until age 97. Now he is content to do the puzzles on Wheel of Fortune. He can guess the answers before Vanna can light up the letters! He enjoys watching other game shows, too, keeping his mind bright, and also says he enjoys television in general.

A sports enthusiast, Ward's teams are the Mavericks and the Cowboys. While he was stationed in Galveston in the military, he and a buddy decided to attend the first

Cotton Bowl Classic. They jumped in his friend's early Model T and headed to Dallas. The game was between TCU and Marquette University, ending with a score of 16-6 respectively. The young servicemen didn't have money for a hotel, so after driving to Dallas, they spent the night in the bus station, went to the ballgame in the morning and drove back to base after dark so they could be on duty the following day.

Extremely active until a fall at age 97 decreased his mobility, Ward was a regular at the Veterans Day parades and was a speaker at the elementary schools. He drove his own car until age 97.

Talking about his childhood, Ward said he attended Friendship School, and would walk home to do chores. "I helped with everything around the house, from drying dishes to feeding cows."

Sometimes family and school friends would get together and play some softball. "I have even hit a home run!" said Ward.

Good ethics and values were taught to Bill Ward and his siblings. "I don't remember ever hearing my daddy say a cuss word. I don't cuss either. It is just not necessary," said Ward. His dad also depended on him from an early age. "I was just 10 when Dad bought a Model A car and had me drive it home from town. He told everyone, 'Willard can drive.'"

What does Choctaw Bill attribute to his long life? "I've kept my nose clean!" In addition to good, clean living, his son, Dennis, said he could remember Ward saying the only enemies he ever made were the Germans!

Does he follow a special diet? "Nope, I eat whatever is put in front of me," says Ward. "I like cereal at breakfast, and I like bacon and eggs." His favorite thing to eat is Mexican food. He says it is all good.

Always positive, Ward said, "I've had a life—a GOOD one! I've been in some rough times on the ground and in the air. I don't know if I would change anything. I just remember them and know I'm still a'kickin'!"

*Willard Ward passed away June 19, 2017, a few months after this interview. He would have been 101 years old on August 17.*

