



# Press Release

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## **Navy Promotes First African-American Female Three-Star Officer**

NORFOLK, Va. – Michelle Janine Howard has been a trail blazer throughout her entire career. She was the first African-American woman to command a U.S. Navy warship, the first female graduate of the Naval Academy to achieve the rank of rear admiral, and the first African-American woman to command an Expeditionary Strike Group at sea.

On Friday, Aug. 24, Howard reached another milestone when she became the first African-American woman promoted to three-star rank in the U.S. armed forces with the assumption of her new job as deputy commander, U.S. Fleet Forces headquartered here.

With a career highlighted by firsts, the path to Howard's current assignment as a Navy vice admiral initially began with an obstacle. It is an obstacle that taught her to embrace change, find strength in the challenges she faced, and to not be afraid to lean on others.

Howard says her Navy career began as a chance encounter while watching television. It was a documentary about one of the military service academies that opened Howard's eyes to a possible future career as an officer in the military. But as Howard learned, not all opportunities were available to women at that time.

The 12-year-old Howard went to her older brother to get his opinion on her becoming an officer. He informed her that U.S. military academies were not open to women.

Undeterred, she spoke to her mother who told her that if she really wanted to join the military as an officer, she would have to wait until she was old enough. Hopefully by that time, society would change, and if it does; then she should go after it. And go for it Howard did.

Four years after that discussion, the federal law concerning the acceptance of women into the nation's service academies changed. At 17, Howard applied and was accepted into the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md.

In 1978, Howard entered the Naval Academy as a freshman. She was in only the third class to accept women. At that time women made up only five percent of the Navy. With over 200 years of naval history and traditions, there was some resistance to change.

With a self deprecating laugh Howard said that the Academy wasn't easy. In retrospect, she's realized that expecting a smooth sail wouldn't have been very realistic.

"When you look at where society was at the time, this was before there was even a woman on the Supreme Court, before Sally Ride was an astronaut, and it was also only five or six years after we became an all volunteer force in the military, so our society was still going through a lot of changes."

She says the one person who was incredibly helpful in putting her experiences in context was Wesley Brown. Brown was the first black Naval Academy graduate, Class of 1949. They met when Howard was a Lt. Cmdr.

“He talked about how great this country is and how much it has changed; that as the country changed, people changed. And even though he was the only African-American to attend Annapolis in the 1940s, when he attended reunions he was a member of that class,” said Howard. “What I really learned from him was that he was a man who could forgive and go on with his life. There is a lot of strength in that.”

Change is inevitable, and Howard rode a wave of it as she moved through her career.

“In the 1980s when the Navy opened the logistics ships to women, that was huge, because it allowed a lot of opportunities for women to serve at sea. Then it was just a few years later that we were engaged in Operation Desert Storm. So even though women weren’t serving on warships, women were still serving in a combat arena, and that started a national conversation. ‘What is a woman’s role in the military?’ So coming out of that time frame the combat exclusion law was repealed and that meant that women were going to serve on combat ships and fly combat aircraft,” said Howard.

After serving sea tours aboard several ships, Howard fulfilled her dream in 1999 of commanding a Navy warship at sea. She took command of the amphibious dock landing ship USS Rushmore (LSD 47), becoming the first African-American woman in such a role.

“The crew was wonderful. To this day that’s what I think about. When you are going into command you think it’s going to be challenging, you believe it’s going to be fun, and it definitely was fun, but there are always challenges you don’t expect. At the same time you go in with the expectation that Sailors can do anything, and that was the ship that proved it. We are so lucky that we have the people who not only have the talent, but who care and want to get it right.”

Howard was selected for the rank of rear admiral lower half in 2006, making her the first admiral selected from the United States Naval Academy class of 1982 and the first woman graduate of the United States Naval Academy selected for flag rank.

In 2009, Howard put on her second star and assumed command of Expeditionary Strike Group Two and deployed in the Gulf of Aden to conduct anti-piracy operations. Within one week of checking aboard her flagship, amphibious assault ship USS Boxer (LHD 4), she was immersed in the rescue of Capt. Richard Phillips, commanding officer of the MV Maersk Alabama.

“That’s an eye-opening way to start a new job. Very quickly we had several ships, special forces, aircraft and it seemed like everyone in the world was focused on one American and trying to make sure he didn’t end up on shore in Somalia. Synchronizing that kind of might and capability was pretty amazing.”

Not including the 3,000 Sailors and Marines in her task force, Howard said they also had support from reconnaissance aircraft out of Djibouti, intelligence support from the United States, and she was in constant communication with the staff at U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain.

“When you think about it that’s a lot of people, and I’m going to say that’s the right call. The Department of Defense is there to protect America’s interest, America’s property and America’s citizens. And in the end there is a deterrence factor. You want the average pirate to look at an American ship and say, ‘we’ll just let that one go by.’”

For the women who are following in her footsteps, Howard has this advice.

“You have to keep your sense of humor. You have to develop stamina and you need to be adaptable. Finally, you need to stay connected to women. It’s important to be able to share experiences and to be able to tap into those shared experiences.”

Over her career, Howard has seen dramatic changes in the Navy and the nation, but there is one more change she’d like to witness.

“I would like to see our nation appreciate the importance of the Navy. We are blessed to live in a time where the average citizen really appreciates their Sailors; when we walk anywhere in a uniform we get thanked. If I could change anything I’d like to have Americans understand who they are thanking and why. How do you convince a nation this big that they are a maritime nation? Our founding fathers got it; they understood the importance of international commerce and that is why they said maintain a Navy in the Constitution. And ironically enough, we are even more dependent on maintaining safe water ways now than they were then.”

Howard may get her wish. As the newest vice admiral in the Navy and Deputy Commander of U.S. Fleet Forces she will have the opportunity to reach a much larger audience than ever before.

As she has proven time and again, there is a first for everything.