

Admiral Michelle Howard

US Navy Ret.



Michelle Howard, US Navy Admiral, retired, was the first woman to become a four-star admiral in the U.S. Navy. She also made history as the first African American woman to captain a U.S. naval ship.

Howard was born into a military family—her father served as a master sergeant in the U.S. Air Force—and by the time she was 12 years old, she had started thinking about embarking on a career in the military. Howard discovered, however, that opportunities for women in U.S. military academies during the early 1970s were nonexistent. That circumstance changed when U.S. Pres. Gerald Ford signed (1975) the Military Procurement Bill, which provided for the admission (starting in 1976) of women into the military academies. During high school Howard applied to the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, and upon entering the academy in 1978, she became one of only seven black women in the school's class of 1,363 students. She graduated in 1982 and later earned (1998) a master's degree in military arts and sciences from the U.S. Army's Command & General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

During Howard's sophomore year at the academy, she piloted her first ship, the destroyer USS *Spruance*, during a summer training cruise. She served aboard the submarine tender USS *Hunley* (1982–85) and the training aircraft carrier USS *Lexington* (1985–87) before being named (1990) the chief engineer aboard the USS *Mount Hood*. She assumed the duties of first lieutenant (1992) aboard the USS *Flint* and was the executive officer (1996) on the USS *Tortuga*. By taking command of the USS *Rushmore*, Howard became the first African American woman to captain a U.S. naval ship.

She served (May 2004–September 2005) as the commander of Amphibious Squadron 7, which aided in relief in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. She became the first African American woman to lead a U.S. Navy battle group when in 2009 she took command of Expeditionary Strike Group Two. This flotilla guarded (April 2009–July 2010) the Persian Gulf as part of the U.S. war on terrorism and performed antipiracy operations in the Indian Ocean. Sailors under her leadership rescued Richard Phillips, the captain of the container ship MV [*Maersk Alabama*](#), who was held hostage (April 8–12, 2009) by Somali pirates. Howard also served in a number of onshore positions, notably as deputy director of the Expeditionary Warfare Division under the chief of naval operations, senior military assistant to the secretary of the navy, chief of staff to the director for strategic plans and policy, and deputy chief of naval operations for operations, plans, and strategy (N3/N5).

On July 1, 2014, Howard became the first woman promoted to the rank of four-star admiral in the U.S. Navy. That day she was also appointed the 38th vice-chief of naval operations (VCNO), making her the second highest-ranking officer in the U.S. Navy. In 2016 she became commander of naval forces in Europe and Africa. The following year she retired from the navy.