



RHUMB LINES

Straight Lines to Navigate By



February 3, 2012

African American / Black History Month

"As I look back at my 29 years in our Navy, the changes I've seen have been dramatic. I truly believe that every Sailor who enlists does so now with the knowledge that they can go as far as their initiative will take them. Our Navy, and our nation, hasn't always been able to claim that. We must continue to learn from those times when we couldn't claim such diversity. We must study those who blazed trails for us and continue to honor them for their courage and their sacrifice. Black History Month is a perfect time to do that."

– **Command Master Chief April D. Beldo, 1st African American Female Command Master Chief of an Aircraft Carrier**

The Navy joins the nation in observing [African American/Black History Month](#) during the month of February. Established in 1926 as Negro History Week by Harvard historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), the observation was expanded in 1976 by President Gerald R. Ford when he declared the entire month of February Black History Month. The 2012 [Black History Month theme](#), "Black Women in American History and Culture," underscores the importance of celebrating our diversity as a nation.

A History of Sacrifice, Strength, and Service

African American/Black History Month is a time to study and reflect on the rich collective history of generations of African Americans and their struggle against adversity to achieve equality. Serving first with state and continental navies, [African American Sailors](#) continue to distinguish themselves within our Navy's fighting forces today.

- In December 1944, Lt. j.g. Harriet Ida Pickens and Ens. Frances Wills became the first African American officers in the [WAVES](#) (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) program.
- In August 1991, [Ms. Gladys J. Commons](#) became the first African American woman to be promoted to the Navy's Senior Executive Service. Ms. Commons currently serves as the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Financial Management and Comptroller.
- [Rear Adm. Lillian Fishburne](#) became the first black female promoted to flag rank in February 1998.
- [Rear Adm. Michelle Howard](#) became the first African American woman to command a warship when she took command of USS Rushmore (LSD 47) on March 12, 1999. She went on to command Expeditionary Strike Group Two and Combined Task Force 151, a multinational task force established to conduct counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.
- In 2007, CMDMC Laura Martinez became the [first African American female Force Master Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery](#).
- Thirty-nine Navy leaders will receive recognition for promoting opportunities in technical and scientific careers Feb. 16 at the 2012 [Black Engineer of the Year](#) (BEYA) STEM Conference in Philadelphia, Pa.

Engaging in Diversity Outreach – Highlighting Achievements

Each year, the Navy's sustained outreach efforts reach a variety of diverse populations. The Navy partners with many affinity groups highlighting the achievements of African Americans, including [National Naval Officers Association](#) (NNOA), [National Society of Black Engineers](#) (NSBE), and [Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#) (HBCU).

Key Messages

- Our Navy is strengthened by the diversity of our people. To be an effective fighting force, diversity must be reflected at all levels, including top leadership.
- Diversity of the thoughts, ideas, and competencies of our people keeps our Navy strong and empowers the protection of the freedoms and opportunities we enjoy every day.
- Diversity has made our nation and Navy stronger. To benefit the most from that diversity, every individual, military or civilian, must be encouraged and enabled to reach his or her full potential.

Facts & Figures

- Today more than 123,000 active duty, Reserve and civilian members of the Navy Total Force identify themselves as African American.
- The current Navy Total Force includes 22 active and Reserve flag officers, 559 active and Reserve master chief petty officers, and 17 members of the Senior Executive Service who identify as African American.
- For more information on the history of African Americans and their remarkable contributions to the Navy, visit <http://www.history.navy.mil>, which is also a great source for [events and speeches](#).