

Leadership ACHIEVEMENT Award

DR. CHRIS HOWARD '91

By Steven Lincoln



When he was an Air Force reservist in 2003, Dr. Chris Howard '91 was called up to be deployed in the Middle East as an intelligence officer. He told his sons, who were 5 and 10 years old at the time, "I'm going to tell the good guys and gals where the bad people are, so we can find them and make sure they know that America doesn't tolerate bad people doing bad things to our nation."

Dr. Howard and his team supplied the Combined Joint Task Force 180 and Task Force 1.1 (Joint Special Operations Command) with human intelligence, efforts that "led me to a blessing of being awarded a Bronze Star," he says.

His Bronze Star is displayed at his parents' home in Plano, Texas, next to his father's Bronze Star, which he received in 1969 after serving in Vietnam.

"That's one of the most special moments of my life, that sort of circle of service," Dr. Howard says.

The Association of Graduates added another special moment to Dr. Howard's growing list when they recognized him as one of three inaugural Leadership Achievement Award recipients this summer.

Dr. Howard serves as the executive vice president and chief operating officer of Arizona State University. The Division I and Research I institution

serves 80,000 degree-seeking students in person, 100,000 online, and approximately 500,000 who take classes without seeking degrees.

"In Air Force terms, I'm like the vice commander meets the J3 [operations] meets the A5 [plans and requirements]. It's been a wonderful odyssey," he says.

A LEADERSHIP ODYSSEY

His journey of leadership achievement began when, at 13, he saw a picture of a West Point cadet. It inspired him to research how to get into the service academy. The first step was writing a letter to his congressman.

"My name is Chris Howard. I'm a good student. I'm a good athlete. I'm a good leader, and I want to serve my country," he wrote. The congressman sent a letter back praising Dr. Howard's thoughtfulness before telling him he had written to the wrong lawmaker.

The congressman forwarded the letter to the correct person, and Dr. Howard began his efforts to be the best applicant for a service academy nomination. He took the right classes; participated in JROTC, including being cadet colonel; started on a state championship football team; and served as president of Fellowship of Christian Athletes and senior class president.

He was recruited by West Point,

the Naval Academy and the Air Force Academy to play football. When he visited the first two, each convinced him he would be a good addition to the service and to the football team. Then, at USAFA, Dr. Howard met Fisher DeBerry, the head football coach.

"He was just different," Dr. Howard said of the legendary coach. "All he promised me was, 'I'm going to work your tail off.'"

His experience with DeBerry and the surroundings at USAFA convinced him to commit to being a Falcon.

SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

As a cadet, he continued to grow as a leader, gaining advice and inspiration from academic advisers, coaches, instructors and commanders. Dr. Howard served as class president as a cadet third class, wing sergeant major, a Basic Cadet Training commander and group commander. He also excelled on the gridiron, earning the inaugural William V. Campbell Trophy in 1990. The honor celebrates excellence in academics, community service and on-field performance.

"I learned that no matter what you're good at, you're not good at everything," Dr. Howard says. "No matter what you did well, the Academy gave you an opportunity to show you something you did not do so well. It gave the opportu-

nity to get better at it, which was really powerful and very compelling. So it's a very humbling but also courage-building and confidence-building journey."

Advisers and professors encouraged Dr. Howard to apply for a Rhodes scholarship, which would enable him to study at Oxford University after graduating from the Academy. But he had his mind set on Harvard for graduate school. Finally, one professor convinced him that Harvard could come later in his academic and military career, so he applied for and was awarded the Rhodes scholarship. He earned a doctorate in politics from Oxford in 1994.

Dr. Howard's military career included service as a helicopter pilot and an intelligence officer, including as the officer in charge of the intel for the 24th Special Tactics Squadron. While there, he started to understand one of the benefits of being an Academy graduate and having a larger network to tap.

"I'd show up at an operation center for a mission and it was like an Academy reunion," he says. "I knew them from being a cadet or from being in the intel world or in flight school, or from flying with them. It was a real life-affirming and leadership-affirming experience."

EXPANDING LEADERSHIP REACH

After active-duty service, Dr. Howard earned an MBA from Harvard Business School and worked for both General Electric and Bristol Myers-Squibb. In 2009, he accepted a call from David Boren, president of the University of Oklahoma and former Oklahoma governor and senator, to begin his next career in higher education as vice president for strategic and leadership initiatives.

At the age of 39, he was named the president of Hampden-Sydney College, near Richmond, Virginia. During his seven-year tenure, enrollment, student retention and alumni giving all increased.

In 2016, Dr. Howard was named the eighth president of Robert Morris University in suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Under his leadership, the RMU 100: Ready to Rise campaign raised more than \$113 million

to strengthen its academic and athletic programs and to remain an affordable education option for students.


Then he joined the leadership team at ASU in 2022, with a focus on partnerships, planning and strategy.

Maj. Nathan Dial '10, an AOG board director and 2021 Young Alumni Excellence Award recipient, first met Dr. Howard while serving as Cadet Wing commander in 2009. Dr. Howard tracked him down and offered valuable time, expertise and perspective that made an impact on Dial's leadership.

"When we think of the ideal U.S. Air Force Academy graduate, we think of someone who has integrity, can succeed in multiple settings, is technically sound in their field(s), and, most importantly, is a leader of character," Dial wrote in his letter nominating Dr. Howard for the Leadership Achievement Award. "Dr. Chris Howard's career exemplifies what our alma mater strives to produce: a selfless servant dedicated to using all his talents to improve the organizations, institutions, and communities in which he resides."

In the 33 years since Dr. Howard commissioned into the U.S. Air Force, he has tried to live according to an adage he learned from his mother: To whom much is given, much is expected. His leadership style and journey reflect his commitment to empower others to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

"Every single person who goes to the Academy is being trained and educated and taught and informed to be a leader. I'm truly humbled to be singled out in a world that you could have probably thrown a dart and hit any of us," Dr. Howard

says about the Leadership Achievement Award. "I thank my colleagues, my classmates, my teammates and members of the Long Blue Line for allowing me to grow and excel as a leader." 



Dr. Chris Howard '91 stands next to his official Robert Morris University presidential portrait, which was unveiled at RMU on Oct. 13, 2023. He served as the eighth president of RMU from 2016 to 2022. (Robert Morris University photo)