Pursuit: The Hunt for the German Battleship Bismarck

By Captain Robert E. Lewis, USNR, (Ret)

It was May of 1941 when England stood alone. France, Belgium, Poland, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands had fallen to Hitler’s Third Reich. The United States, Ireland, and Sweden were still neutral. Only the convoys crossing the sea from Canada and the United States provided the lifeline that kept England going. Now the German Battleship Bismarck, the largest, newest, and most powerful battleship in the world was threatening this lifeline.

Bismarck, the jewel of the German navy, displaced more than 50,000 tons and was outfitted with eight 15-inch guns. She broke out of her German port for her first mission on May 18, 1941 and headed for the open Atlantic to intercept and destroy convoys en route from the U.S. The British Royal Navy located the Bismarck between Iceland and Greenland on May 24 and sent the pride of the Royal Navy, the Battlecruiser HMS Hood, the “Mighty Hood”, and the new, unfinished battleship HMS Prince of Wales, to face Bismarck. They were ordered by Churchill to find the Bismarck quickly because several large convoys were heading for Britain and there would be a terrible blood bath of merchantmen if Bismarck got loose among the convoys. In the ferocious battle that ensued, the Hood exploded and sank within minutes, losing all but three of her crew complement in excess of 1,300. Bismarck had also sustained damage, so raced to dry dock facilities in occupied France. The hunt was on.

The epic chase of the Bismarck was the greatest air-sea pursuit in the history of naval warfare, covering the entire North Atlantic during nine days in May 1941. Contributors to the hunt for the Bismarck included the neutral U.S. Coast Guard, the neutral U.S. Navy, neutral Ireland, Swedish Naval Intelligence, and both French and Norwegian Resistance Fighters. This is a gripping tale of heroism and doom on the high seas.

Captain Bob Lewis, a Wardroom Club member, served with the U.S. Navy as a carrier-based ASW Patrol Plane Commander, on the aircraft carriers WASP, INTREPID, and SARATOGA. He then joined the Naval Reserve at Naval Air Station South Weymouth, where he flew P-2s and P-3s and served as Executive Officer of the NAS Brunswick Naval Reserve Unit, and later as Commanding Officer of the NAS South Weymouth Naval Reserve unit. He retired from the Navy in 1994 on board the USS Constitution.

After completing his active military service and teaching junior high school math and science for several years, Captain Lewis joined the engineering staff at MITRE Corporation in 1983. From 1986 to 1994 he worked in Germany at Headquarters, US Army Europe, on the development of joint communication systems to integrate the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines. From 1994 to 2005 he provided engineering management to the Joint Expeditionary Force Experiments, and was Lead for the evolution of the NATO AWACs. He returned to Germany in 2005 for a five-year stint leading the communications engineering effort for a Forward Operating Base in Romania. His final assignment at MITRE was as the Domain Technical Lead for USAF Bomber Mission Planning Systems. He retired from MITRE in 2013.