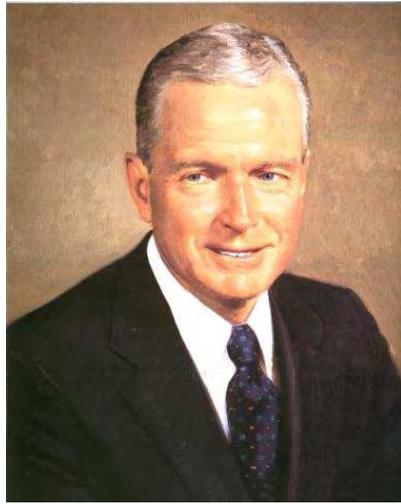


RALPH W. COUSINS



***MIDSHIPMAN, USNA; NAVAL AVIATOR, WORLD WAR II;
AIRCRAFT CARRIER SKIPPER; FOUR-STAR ADMIRAL
PRESIDENT, NEWPORT NEWS SHIPBUILDING, 1977-1979***

by Bill Lee

Introduction - Most people who were working at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) in the 1970's never got to know Admiral Ralph W. Cousins, USN (Ret.) very well. I make no pretense to having been an exception, in spite of interfacing with him on numerous occasions. But I did witness this usually reserved and private person exhibit a moment of raw emotion.

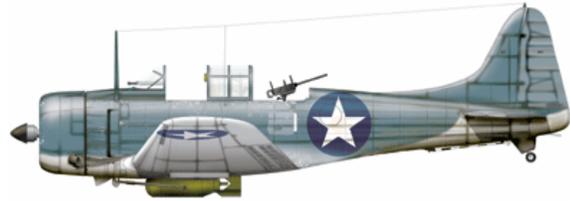
Before I recount that experience, I believe reviewing his career and accomplishments will help the reader better appreciate the rare opportunity that chance presented me when Ralph Cousins momentarily revealed a side of himself I suspect few others ever saw.

A Sterling Naval Career - Ralph Wynne Cousins was born July 24, 1915 in Eldorado, Oklahoma. He attended public schools and junior college in Ironwood, Michigan, and was appointed to the United States Naval Academy in June 1933. After graduating in June 1937, he was assigned to the battleship PENNSYLVANIA (NNS Hull #171).

During the period of time he was assigned to that battlewagon, she was home ported at Pearl Harbor. She was lightly damaged while in dry dock there on December 7, 1941. But before that cataclysmic event occurred, Ralph Cousins had departed.



He transitioned into naval aviation in 1940. After becoming qualified as a carrier pilot, Cousins was assigned to a dive bombing squadron that flew SBD Dauntless aircraft. SBD, in naval parlance, designates the manufacturer and type of aircraft. But those who flew her in combat insisted SBD stood for *Slow, But Deadly*.



Then-Lieutenant Ralph Cousins was assigned to the USS LEXINGTON (CV-2) at the outbreak of World War II. During the Battle of the Coral Sea, in May 1942, when the LEXINGTON was lost to enemy action, Lieutenant Cousins was awarded the Navy Cross; the Navy's second highest award for valor.



He received that medal for extraordinary heroism while leading dive-bombing attacks on a Japanese aircraft carrier and scoring a direct hit with a 1,000 pound bomb. He is in the center of this group of pilots who received similar awards. A few months later, Cousins served as Executive Officer of a dive bombing squadron that participated in the Solomon Islands Campaign; an Allied success which prevented an enemy invasion of Australia.

He received two Air Medals for leading his squadron against enemy forces during the latter stages of World War II. Late in the war, he established a program to train fleet aviators in the deployment of rocket weapons. When the war ended, Cousins elected to stay in the Navy. By 1947, he had attained the rank of Commander.



He subsequently served in a variety of line, staff and command duties, rising to the rank of Captain. In 1960 Ralph Cousins became the Commanding Officer of the NNS-built aircraft carrier USS Midway (CV-41); shown here as she appeared when he was her skipper. Promoted to Rear Admiral, he served as Commander of the Attack Carrier Striking Force stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin.

For two years, he was responsible for all naval air strikes and combat-supported missions flown from carriers stationed off Viet Nam. Under his command at the time were as many as 30 naval vessels. That array of powerful warships operated for months at a time at ‘Yankee Station’ and included as many as five American aircraft carriers at a time.

Ralph Cousins was named Vice Chief of Naval Operations when he was promoted to the rank of Admiral in 1970. In 1972 he was appointed NATO's eighth Supreme Allied Commander. In addition, he assumed the position of Commander in Chief of the US Atlantic Fleet.



When he retired in May of 1975, one of the highlights of his final change-of-command ceremonies held onboard the USS NIMITZ (NNS Hull #594) at the Norfolk Naval Station came as a complete and delightful surprise to him.



The Commemorative Air Force had one of their vintage aircraft repainted to resemble the SBD Dauntless which Ralph Cousins flew in combat. This vintage aircraft was flown to Norfolk Naval Air Station and then hoisted onto the carrier’s flight deck and placed next to an F-14 Tomcat fighter, which at the time was just entering the fleet.

A Relatively Short Career With Tenneco - He joined the shipyard the same year he retired from the Navy. His first assignment was to serve as an assistant to NNS President Jack Diesel. Cousins was highly respected by the Navy, so his selection by Diesel was viewed as part of the shipyard’s ‘fence-mending’ with the Navy, following years of disputes over costs.

Diesel was promoted to an executive position with Tenneco at the end of 1976. Cousins was named as his replacement and served as President of NNS from January 1, 1977 until January 1, 1979. His military management style, honed during decades of naval service, was largely disliked by career shipbuilders who longed for the ‘clubby, up-through-the-ranks’ days that dominated NNS management before Tenneco acquired the Company.

Although not his idea, it was on his watch at NNS that it became apparent after Tenneco had invested in an expansion of the yard’s facilities that the domestic commercial ship market was not viable; at least not domestically. Stoically accepting unwarranted, after-the-fact criticism, he dryly said: “We diversified into a collapsing market”.

Mid-year, 1979, he was named Chairman of Tenneco Europe, based in London, where he served for six years. Retiring again, in September 1985, he moved back to Newport News. Ralph W. Cousins passed away on August 5, 2009, at age 94.

A Revealing Moment - In 1976, Jack Diesel dispatched Ralph Cousins and myself to Washington, DC to meet with Department of Energy (DOE) officials at their Forrestal Building headquarters. Our objective was to discuss bidding on a forthcoming operating contract renewal at one of DOE's nuclear weapons facilities.

We did not want to waste our time or energies if DOE felt that doing so would distract from the Company's primary mission of designing and building ships for the Nuclear Navy or...worse...raise objections from Admiral Rickover. We were careful to note that no seasoned shipbuilders in high-level positions of responsibility in the yard's naval nuclear work program would be involved.

It was an efficient meeting. A couple of the DOE people present were ex-navy, and the most senior DOE official present was Jack Crawford, the first Naval Reactor's representative assigned to NNS. Having seen him 'in action' at NNS, I was a bit surprised at the extreme deference Jack displayed towards Ralph Cousins. I shouldn't have been. After all, Jack was a retired Navy Captain. He politely addressed Ralph Cousins as 'Admiral' and immediately deferred whenever Ralph wished to say something or ask a question

After obtaining assurances that what we proposed to do was acceptable...I suspect it had already been cleared by Crawford with Rickover...we left DOE's Forrestal Building headquarters. I assumed we'd jump in a cab, head for the airport and try to get on an earlier return flight to Newport News. But once outside, Ralph Cousins 'suggested' that we take a quick tour of the spanking new National Air and Space Museum directly across the street. I had no objection; in fact I welcomed the opportunity.

Once inside, he made a bee-line for Gallery 203. A huge sign above the entrance to that display area was framed in lights just like the illumination of every carrier's number that is similarly displayed on its island. It should be noted that the numbers used were representative of the year the museum opened; not CVN-76.

It was (and still is) an impressive exhibit. You don't just enter this gallery; you 'come aboard'. The shrill sound of a bosun's whistle is automatically generated as you cross the quarterdeck of the mythical aircraft carrier *USS Smithsonian*. Inside is a partial recreation of a hangar deck bay. The surrounding structures and equipment were supposedly obtained from an aircraft carrier. Which one was not identified, but I suspect one of the ESSEX-class carriers.



Visitors can explore an adjacent realistic squadron ready room or go up a level and visit a recreated navigation bridge and 'PriFly', the ship's air traffic control center. Here a film of "cat shots" and "traps" (takeoffs and landings) made onboard a modern carrier are continuously shown.

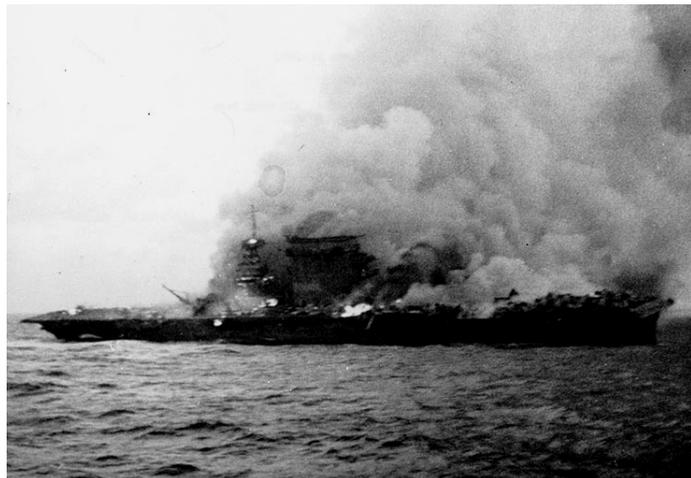
Four vintage carrier aircraft are positioned in the hangar bay, including this restored SBD Dauntless. Surrounding the aircraft are additional exhibits pertaining to carrier warfare in World War II and modern carrier aviation.



Ralph Cousins initially ignored all the other exhibits and walked slowly around the SBD, touching...almost caressing...her wings, fuselage and tail surfaces. At that time, I was completely ignorant as to his participation in the Battle of the Coral Sea. When I asked why he was so interested in that particular aircraft, his piercing and clear 'aviator eyes' took on a far-away look. In an uncharacteristically hesitant voice laden with emotion, he quietly spoke; more 'to' the aircraft than to me.

He described piloting the very last aircraft, also an SBD, ever to take off from CV-2. He said that the carrier was badly damaged, had a severe list to port, the flight deck was on fire in several places and Japanese planes were attacking when he attempted to take off. He managed, somehow, to get airborne. But many of his fellow pilots did not make it; nor did hundreds of the ship's crew.

Not knowing what to say, but having the rare good sense not to try, I left him to his memories. When he caught up with me a few minutes later, there was no mention of that brief exposure of his emotions by either of us. In meetings over the next few years at NNS, I occasionally would see that far-away look again and wonder if perhaps he was thinking again of the LEXINGTON before she finally succumbed to the sea.



Postscript - Neither at the museum that day nor at any time later did he ever mention to me bombing a Japanese carrier. Or flying another strike as LEXINGTON was in her death throes, or of later landing on the NNS-built carrier USS YORKTOWN (CV-5), which was also damaged in that pivotal sea battle.



Or of his receiving the coveted Navy Cross, or a host of other medals. I discovered all those things and much more years later when reading about carrier operations during World War II.

Shipbuilders used to, and I assume still do, sometimes resent retired military people becoming employed at NNS. We often gave these ‘double dippers’ a rough time because they were drawing a military pension and an NNS salary. Especially at those times when they tried to tell us how to design or build ships.

I regret to say that’s pretty much how I initially felt about Ralph Cousins when I first met him in 1976; when he was in what I imprudently considered to be a high-priced, but largely non-productive staff position. That is, until the day we stood together in the hangar bay of that faux aircraft carrier, the *USS Smithsonian*...

To Admiral Cousins: Far too belatedly, but most respectfully...

