

By Cdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

Brand, Max. *Fighter Squadron at Guadalcanal*. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD 21402. 1996. 248 pp. Ill. \$25.95.

As WW II moves into the next half-century of collective memory, we are seeing a growing number of wartime memoirs of what it was like “out there.” The Pacific war has generated a number of these biographies. This latest volume is unusual because it has taken more than 50 years to reach publication. The author, whose real name was Frederick Faust but as Max Brand was best known for his western novels, had interviewed many of the returning veterans of the Guadalcanal campaign with the idea of publishing their stories. However, at age 52, Faust was killed in action as a war correspondent in Italy, and the manuscript for his projected book on Marine aviators in the Solomons lay undisturbed until his daughter and her husband published this book.

Fighter Squadron focuses on one unit, Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 212; its heroic commander, Lt. Col. Harold W. Bauer; and their role in the bloody aerial campaign of late 1942. One of the senior squadron leaders, Bauer fine-tuned his group of untried aviators at Efate in the New Hebrides, south-east of the Solomons, while awaiting the call to join the fighting.

Bauer occasionally flew in to Henderson Field on Guadalcanal to wangle a flight with VMF-223 or VMF-224. His men also flew with these squadrons, commanded by Majors John Smith and Robert Galer, respectively, who became high-scoring aces and who, like Bauer, received the Medal of Honor for their service in the Solomons.

Bauer’s medal was posthumously awarded after he was killed in action in November 1942, an event that is fully described in the book. His son, William, eventually became a Marine aviator, commanding his father’s old squadron.

In the book, we meet the lesser-known members of the “Cactus Air Force,” the name given to the group of squadrons based on Guadalcanal. These young pilots hurled their Grumman *Wildcats* against the daily Japanese raids, hoping the tough little fighter planes would hold together for one more engagement against their skilled, well-equipped opponents in *Zeros*.

With ample maps and photos complementing the text, *Fighter Squadron* is an evocative window through which to view this legendary battle.

Ewing, Steve and John B. Lundstrom. *Fateful Rendezvous: the Life of Butch O’Hare*. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD 21402. 1997. 408 pp. Ill. \$32.95.

Long credited as the U.S. Navy’s first ace in WW II, Edward H. “Butch” O’Hare also received the first naval aviation Medal of Honor (MOH) in the war for his stout defense of his carrier, *Lexington* (CV 2), on 20 February 1942. Wading into a force of Japanese bombers, he shot down several, causing the survivors to flee.

Thrust into the mad whirl of public receptions, including the award of the MOH by President Franklin Roosevelt at the White House—as well as a surprise promotion to lieutenant commander—O’Hare was feted as one of America’s first Naval Aviator heroes at a time when such an icon was needed. As famous as he was, it is surprising that biographies of O’Hare have been limited. *Fateful Rendezvous* is the first book-length treatment of O’Hare’s life.

Born in St. Louis, Mo., he was a graduate of the Naval Academy. O’Hare eventually joined VF-3, where he came under the tutelage of LCdr. John “Jimmy” Thach, considered to be one of the Navy’s premier aviation tacticians.

Eventually receiving command of his old squadron, then its air wing, Butch O’Hare pioneered night-fighting techniques in the new Grumman F6F *Hellcat* and TBM *Avenger*. On 26 November 1943, he took a group of his nightfighters up to scout for Japanese prowlers—and found them. Encountering adversary aircraft, now nicknamed “Betty” in the Allied code system, he and his crews accounted for a few of the bombers, but one of the enemy planes got in a lucky shot and the air wing commander went down.

For many years, O’Hare’s loss was attributed to the confusion of the rear-turret gunner of the *Avenger*, who mistook O’Hare’s *Hellcat* for a Japanese aircraft. The authors put this long-held legend to rest by declaring that Butch O’Hare died at the hands of the enemy. They also noted that RAdm. Arthur Radford thought so highly of O’Hare that he recommended him for a second Medal of Honor, citing Butch’s pioneering nightfighting work and ultimate loss in action. However, the MOH nomination was downgraded to a Navy Cross.

Fateful Rendezvous takes time to find its literary style, but once the authors move into their subject’s wartime exploits, it becomes a good biography of one of this country’s most enduring aviator personalities.