

THE COACH

By Hill Goodspeed

Born in Woodruff, Kans., on 20 November 1908, Harold W. Bauer was raised in Nebraska. He graduated from the Naval Academy in June 1930 after a brilliant athletic career, particularly on the football field, and also left Annapolis with a nickname. His dark complexion, square facial features and Nebraska lineage prompted his classmates to christen him "Injun Joe." He would be known as Joe thereafter, even to his family.



Bauer opted for a commission in the Marine Corps, but it was not until 1934 that the flying bug bit him. He earned his wings as Naval Aviator No. 4189 in 1936 after flight training at NAS Pensacola, Fla., and spent the remaining peacetime years mainly in fighter squadrons. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, Joe Bauer was ready to fight. "War is a hell of a thing to face," he wrote his wife, but "there is no better way to die than in the process of defending one's



country and loved ones.” He didn’t know how prophetic this statement was.

By March 1942 Bauer was skipper of his own outfit, Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 212. Just as he had hit the line running as a star fullback at Annapolis, he instilled in his pilots an aggressive air combat philosophy. Though the Japanese *Zeros* they would be facing were faster and more maneuverable than their own F4F *Wildcats*, the rugged Grumman fighters possessed an advantage in firepower. By turning toward attackers and making head-on runs against them, Bauer believed his leathernecks would come out on top.

During the early weeks of Operation Watchtower, the invasion of Guadalcanal begun on 7 August 1942, VMF-212 fed pilots into Guadalcanal piecemeal instead of entering battle as a unit. With elements of his squadron based in New Caledonia and the New Hebrides islands, “Coach,” as Bauer’s fliers came to call him, would make periodic visits to the island. Spoiling for a fight during one trip on 28 September, Bauer manned a *Wildcat* and joined others intercepting a Japanese air raid. Making an overhead pass against a twin-engine bomber, he flamed the attacker for his first kill. Later he recorded in his diary that “it was the greatest sight of my life to see the Jap bombers fall out of the sky.”

Bauer would see more Japanese planes plummet to earth in the coming weeks, many the work of his own guns. During another stint on Guadalcanal on 3 October he jumped into a VMF-223 bird when radar picked up incoming bogeys. A gaggle of F4Fs took advantage of high cloud cover and ambushed the flight of Japanese attackers. After downing two *Zeros* in quick succession, Coach had only one functional machine gun left. Undaunted, he reentered the fray and shot down two additional fighters for his third



and fourth kills of the day and fifth overall, thus becoming an ace.

On 16 October Bauer was leading his squadron from Espiritu Santo and had just arrived over Guadalcanal’s Henderson Field when he noticed aircraft at a distance—enemy dive-bombers withdrawing from the area after attacking the destroyer *McFarland* (DD 237). Without hesitation and despite his plane being hindered by two wing tanks, Coach raced toward the enemy formation and downed three planes, the last just 50 feet over the water.

Shortly thereafter, Bauer’s days as a combat pilot appeared to be over. A lieutenant colonel, he was reassigned as CO of the fighter command on Guadalcanal, tasked with directing the aerial defense of the island. However, it did not take long for Coach to find his way into the air again. On 14 November, during the Battle of Guadalcanal, Bauer joined a strike group for an attack against enemy transports, telling one of the pilots, Captain Joe Foss, “I’m not going to let you fellows have all the fun.”

After the dive-bombers and torpedo planes had finished their attack on the convoy, Bauer joined two other fighter pilots in strafing the ships. As the three fighters finished their runs they were jumped by a pair of *Zeros*, and Bauer maneuvered for a head-on attack and blew the lead enemy fighter out

of the sky. The other pilots, Foss and Second Lieutenant Thomas W. Furlow, chased the remaining enemy fighters in vain. Upon returning to the scene of Bauer’s triumph, Foss found Coach swimming in the middle of an oil slick and waving his arms to signal him to return to base. After an unsuccessful attempt to drop the life raft from his aircraft, Foss returned at top speed to Guadalcanal and joined another officer in a J2F *Duck* seaplane to search for Bauer. Unfortunately, descending darkness thwarted the

rescue attempt, and searches the next day failed to turn up any sign of him. Though he was listed as missing in action, no trace of Bauer was ever found.

It was not until after the war, when Joe Bauer had been declared killed in action, that his wife Harriette and son Bill accepted a posthumous Medal of Honor from Major General Field Harris at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif., for Bauer’s actions from 28 September to 16 October 1942. The Marine Corps and Navy bestowed other honors on the fallen hero as well, naming the wartime airfield on Vila, New Hebrides, after him and in 1957 commissioning *Bauer* (DE 1025).

The finest tributes, however, came from those with whom he served. Fellow fighter ace and Medal of Honor recipient Joe Foss characterized him best in a letter to Joe Bauer’s parents. “To me, Marine Corps Aviation’s greatest loss in this war was that of your son. . . . He really had a way all his own of getting a tough job done efficiently and speedily, and was admired by all, from the lowest Private to the highest General. . . . I am certain that wherever Joe is today, he is doing things the best way—the Bauer way.”

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Opposite bottom, the members of Marine Fighting Squadron 212, including skipper Joe Bauer (standing eighth from the left), posed with a squadron *Wildcat* at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal.