

Lt. Col. Harold W. Bauer - Guadalcanal Hero

C.O. VMF-212, shot down 11 Japanese planes over Guadalcanal

Cactus Air Force ace, Medal of Honor Recipient; lost in action



Harold "Indian Joe" Bauer, CO of **VMF-212** was possibly the finest fighter pilot in the Marine Corps.

An Annapolis graduate and a football player, he had spent seven years in Marine aviation before 1942. His real name was "Harold William"; he had picked up the nickname "Indian Joe" at the Academy because of his height, high cheekbones, and dark features. As CO of VMF-212, he trained his men well, for one month at Tontouta on New Caledonia and at Efate. His pilots called him "The Coach" because he ran the squadron as a team, and at age thirty-four was ten years older than most of them.

They trained at Efate during the summer of 1942, which at that time was very much on the front line. While a token Australian force was posted on Guadalcanal, a Japanese strike at any time was considered possible and a radar set was installed on an Efate mountain top.

Guadalcanal was one of the few places in the region able to support a bomber-capable airstrip, so the Japs occupied it in July and began building one. But on August 7, the U.S. Marines landed, took over the airstrip, and drove the few Japanese troops into the jungle. By the 20th, Marine air units flew in to support them, but most of Bauer's VMF-212 continued training on Efate. Eight pilots from the squadron, notably Captain Everton and Lieutenant Conger, served with VMF-223 in August and September.

Bauer managed a few "guest appearances" at Guadalcanal with VMF-223 while his own squadron was based at Efate. Flying with them and their leading ace, Marion Carl, was a little ironic, because

Bauer and Carl had developed a rivalry before the war in San Diego. But after a mock dogfight, they had built a respectful friendship. Bauer flew up to Guadalcanal to inspect the airstrip on **September 27**, and asked Galer if there was a spare plane for him to fly. He went up with -224 and promptly shot down a Betty bomber. (Other sources report that he shot down a Zero on September 28, while flying with VMF-223.)

His best day came on **October 3**, 1942 when leading a division in Carl's flight, "The Coach" downed 4 Zeros with four quick bursts, but jamming his guns in the process. Then he noticed a Zero going after an American pilot in a parachute, and with only one gun working, an infuriated Bauer dove after the Zero, shooting it down, and then returning to downed pilot, marking the spot by flying circles over it. A destroyer picked up the Marine pilot. On that day, "The Coach" was the last to land, and was obviously excited about his victories, having left his high-altitude supercharger on. (Officially, his credits for the day were four confirmed and one probable.) In any event, he earned custody of a captured Japanese battle flag that the Marine Raiders had given to the airmen. Bauer immediately directed that the flag be sent to the Marine trophy room in Quantico, Virginia.

In mid-October, the Japanese made one of their major efforts to regain Guadalcanal, shelling it with battleships for three nights in a row. By the morning of the 16th, the Marines of Cactus had only 12(?) Wildcats operational, and little in the way of gasoline, ammunition, or other supplies. An old destroyer, the *USS McFarland* had come in with supplies, and was off-loading aviation fuel onto a barge. At this juncture, nine Val dive bombers came in, bombing the barge, and threatening the *McFarland*. Just then Bauer was landing VMF-212 at the Fighter Strip after a long flight from Espiritu Santo. As he circled the field, watching the other 18 planes of his squadron land, he saw the smokes and flames from the stricken barge, as well as the diving Vals. Despite nearly empty gas tanks, he set out alone after the eight dive bombers. He caught them at 200 feet, dove into the Vals and flamed three (four?) in succession. This was to win him the Medal of Honor.

Throughout the rest of October, Bauer stayed on the ground, directing all Cactus fighter operations, which was his real responsibility, not flying combat sorties. He kept after his men to seek out Zeros, and not to run from combat. His leadership and inspirational qualities were such that his fliers would rather face the Japanese fighters than the Coach's wrath. It's notable that Colonel Bauer only left his ground duties for four missions, and downed eleven planes on those few occasions.

Starting on **November 12**, the Japanese made a major effort to reinforce Guadalcanal. Army, Navy, and Marine fliers as well as surface ships were engaged over the new few days, scoring heavily but taking losses as well. On the 13th, American bombers and torpedo planes sank the battleship *Hiei*. 'Cactus' was shelled that night, and by dawn of the 14th, there were only 14 Wildcats and 10 Army fighters operational. Lt. Col. Bauer, now with Fighter Command HQ, went up, along with Duke Davis, Joe Foss, and Jim Flatley.

Joe Foss described Indian Joe Bauer's last flight in the following letter to his family:

On November 14, 1942, we had heavy enemy action up the line from Guadalcanal. All day we bombed, torpedoed, and strafed their ships by air. Late in the afternoon we had several of their troop transports dead in the water. About four o'clock I received orders to take my flight and escort the dive bombers to that area, and if enemy air activity permitted I was to strafe the transports. Just before I took off, Colonel Joe told me that he was going along and see just how my boys worked. He said I wasn't going to get all the fun alone, so we all took off. Upon arriving there, we found several troop transports dead in the water and smoking. Some warships were cruising among them to pick up survivors and ward off air attacks. Tom Furlow and I followed the colonel and circled high above. The three of us circled for some time and watched our planes attack and start to leave. All the surrounding

air seemed clear from enemy air activity. So we came down and strafed the ships below. We came right out on the water and headed for home.

All of a sudden, tracers shot over my head. Upon looking back, I saw two Jap Zeros diving on us, shooting. At once, Joe turned and headed straight for one. Both he and the Jap were shooting everything. Then - Bang! And the Zero blew up, and Joe zoomed and made a turn for home. Tom and I chased the other Zero toward Tokyo but couldn't catch him. Upon returning to the scene of Joe's action (twelve or fifteen miles due north of the Russell Islands), I was unable to spot him. I saw an oil slick about a mile south of the spot where the Zero had gone in, and upon circling it saw Joe swimming with his life vest on. I went right down to within a few feet of him, and he waved both arms and jumped up out of the water. Then he waved me toward home. He was in good shape - no visible cuts. I tried to give him my life raft, but it wouldn't come out, so I gave full throttle toward home. I landed and took off at once in a Duck (a Grumman J2F amphibian bi-plane) with Major Joe Renner. We were within ten miles of Joe and it got pitch black, so we had to return home. At daybreak the next morning (Nov. 15) we were on the site of the colonel's landing with my flight of eight and the Duck. The only thing in sight were two Jap planes, which we shot down at once. We searched and searched the area but no sign of a soul. ... So in my way of thinking, one of the following two things happened - either the Japs happened upon him and took him prisoner or the sharks got him. If the Japs have him, he is safe, in my mind, as he wore his lieutenant colonel's silver oak leaves.

The above is as complete as the action really was.

To me, Marine Corps' Aviation greatest loss in this war is that of Joe. 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.

I am hoping that someday Joe will come back - I'll never lose hope, knowing Joe as I did.

No trace of Lt. Col. Harold Bauer was ever found. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, which citation follows:

Rank and organization: Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps.

Born: 20 November 1908. Woodruff, Kans.

Appointed from: Nebraska.

*For extraordinary heroism and conspicuous courage as Squadron Commander of Marine Fighting Squadron 212 in the South Pacific Area during the period 10 May to 14 November 1942. Volunteering to pilot a fighter plane in defense of our positions on Guadalcanal, **Lt. Col. Bauer** participated in 2 air battles against enemy bombers and fighters outnumbering our force more than 2 to 1, boldly engaged the enemy and destroyed 1 Japanese bomber in the engagement of 28 September and shot down 4 enemy fighter planes in flames on 3 October, leaving a fifth smoking badly. After successfully leading 26 planes on an over water ferry flight of more than 600 miles on 16 October, Lt. Col. Bauer, while circling to land, sighted a squadron of enemy planes attacking the U.S.S. McFarland. Undaunted by the formidable opposition and with valor above and beyond the call of duty, he engaged the entire squadron and, although alone and his fuel supply nearly exhausted, fought his plane so brilliantly that 4 of the Japanese planes were destroyed before he was forced down by lack of fuel. His intrepid fighting spirit and distinctive ability as a leader and an airman, exemplified in his splendid record of combat achievement, were vital factors in the successful operations in the South Pacific Area.*