

MEDAL OF HONOR AVIATORS

by William J. Bennett

RP6910-44

Boyington, Gregory Major USMC

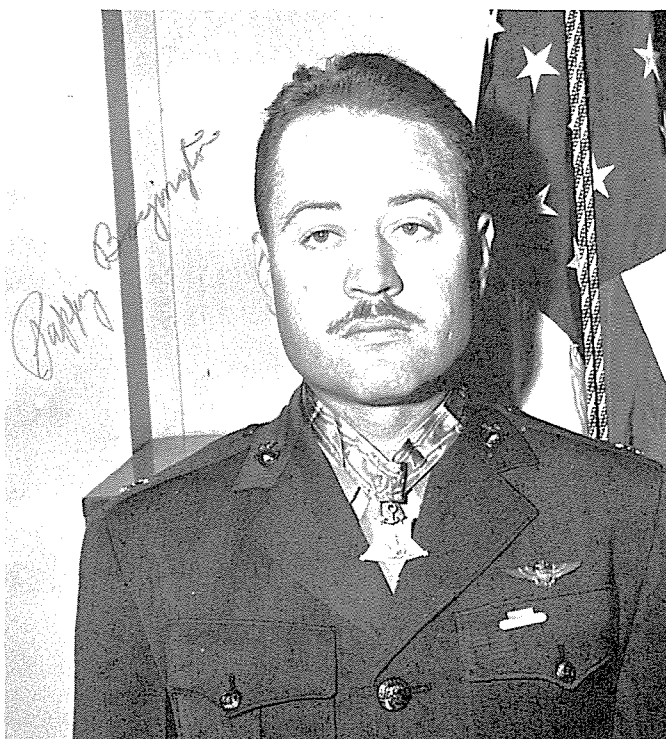
The forty-fourth aviator to be awarded the Medal of Honor was Major Gregory Boyington, USMC. While an aviation instructor at N.A.S. Pensacola, Florida, in the spring of 1941, 1st Lt. Boyington learned of a recruiting going on to form an American Volunteer Group of fighter pilots to fly and fight for China with the quiet blessings of President Roosevelt. Boyington was a bit older than what was being looked for so he sought out the recruiting agent and talked his way into being recruited as a flight leader. While with the AVG, he was credited with six victories. One of the Curtiss *Tomahawks* known to have been flown by him in combat was P8182, Nr. 21 of the First (Adam and Eve) Pursuit Squadron. Not wishing to be drafted into the USAAF when his AVG contract was ended, he resigned from the AVG on 29 May 1942. After all, Boyington was a Marine and wished to remain a Marine.

Returning to the USA, Mr. Boyington immediately applied for the reinstatement of his Marine Corps Commission as had been promised to him before he left the Corps for the AVG. Having received no reply after a few months of waiting, Mr. Boyington fired off a three-page night letter direct to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy Department. Shortly thereafter, Major G. Boyington, USMC, was aboard the S.S. *Lurline* en route to the South Pacific.

After arriving at Espiritu Santo, Major Boyington was able to get himself assigned to VMF-222 as their executive officer. Just before they were deployed to the Solomon Islands to fly combat in F4Fs, the C.O. of VMF-222 was detached and re-assigned, so Boyington stepped into the command of VMF-222 "Flying Deuces." He led his squadron through a relatively quiet, uneventful tour escorting bombers while flying from the airbase at Guadalcanal. An untimely broken ankle prevented him from taking VMF-222 back into combat for their second tour after they had been re-equipped with the new F4U *Corsair* fighter.

After his ankle had healed, Boyington was briefly made the commander of six different squadrons, one right after the other. The trouble was that all of the pilots and aircraft had been already transferred out and his job was just to clean up the paperwork loose ends of each squadron, a task that he was not altogether fond of.

After enduring the frustrations of paper pushing, and getting desperate to return to combat, Boyington talked to his group commander, playing upon the clear need for fresh fighter squadrons in the combat zone now and how slowly the new squadrons were being sent out from Stateside. He was allowed to form a new fighter squadron from the casual and replacement pilots on hand at Espiritu Santo. Scrounging up



a bunch of *Corsairs* and borrowing the number "214" from another squadron that had just completed a combat tour, Major Boyington quickly devised and put his scratch-squadron through an accelerated training program. Here he gained the famous nickname of "Pappy" because he was about 10 years older than the pilots he was going to lead into combat.

VMF-214 was sent to a newly established Marine airstrip on Munda in the Russell Island group. Their first combat mission was flown on 16 September 1943. Led by Pappy, 20 F4Us flew escort to some 150 SBD and TBF bombers intent on shaking up a Japanese air base at Ballale. Finding a bunch of enemy fighters airborne in the target area, Pappy's flock had a field day. Of the 20 downed enemy aircraft, Boyington claimed five.

It was after this mission that the name *Black Sheep* was chosen for VMF-214 in lieu of other less printable names that had been proposed for this group of pilots that had not quite fitted into the pattern of acceptable decorum established by the powers that be. The *Black Sheep*'s first combat tour was eventful and ended with a last-minute, four-plane strafing mission against Kara and Kahili, two Japanese air bases.

After R&R in Australia, an attempt was made to relieve Major Boyington from the command of VMF-215. Fortunately, a higher headquarters decision prevailed. It was opposed to the breaking up of a winning combination.

On their second tour, the *Black Sheep* Squadron was based at Vella Lavella. The duties were to fly escort and all the other various combat missions that came their way creating as much mischief upon the Japanese as they could. Many are the tales that have been told of Pappy Boyington's efforts to insult,

cajole, incite and/or otherwise trick the enemy into the air for combat. By Christmas Eve of 1943, Major Boyington's personal score was 21 victories.

On Christmas, Major Boyington led his flock on a fighter sweep-hunting for targets in the Rabaul area. Catching some enemy fighters in the air, Pappy attacked and downed four of them. In his book, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, he mentioned that he thought it was a hell of a thing to do to someone on Christmas Day.

By 27 December 1943, there were only 10 more days remaining of this combat tour for VMF-214 and Boyington knew that it would be his last one. He was the oldest active Marine fighter pilot in combat and every other pilot of his age and rank were already in higher level non-combat jobs. His score was at 25 victories. His entire squadron, and then some, were pulling for him to match or break the Rickenbacker record set in WWI. He had been pushing himself very hard and was in poor physical shape. Unfortunately, Japanese aircraft had become few and hard to find.

On 3 January 1944, Major Boyington took off on what was his final combat mission. The day had started out badly. His fighter was not quite ready so he had to switch to another aircraft. At the last minute, his fighter was fixed and pronounced ready, so Pappy switched back to it. After leading his *Black Sheep* the overwater miles to Rabaul, Boyington finally found a formation of enemy fighters in the air. He and his wingman, Capt. George A. Ashmun, pushed over and attacked them. In the subsequent battle, Pappy downed three, Ashmun downed one off of Pappy's tail, but a second larger flight of Japanese fighters was able to separate the pair of *Corsairs* from the rest of the *Black Sheep* and downed both of them. Boyington was able to jump from his doomed bird and parachuted into the water alive. He was circled for a time by his squadron who had caught up until they had to leave for lack of fuel.

After bobbing about in his one-man life raft for several hours, Major Boyington was picked up by a Japanese submarine en route to Rabaul. The Search and Rescue team of PBVs that was dispatched to save him arrived too late and found only water, so Boyington was believed to be dead by the Marine Corps.

The International Red Cross was not informed that Boyington had been captured and was still alive, for he had been classified as a special prisoner. Believing him dead, the Marine Corps had Major Boyington awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. Not until the war was over did the Corps learn that he had survived. After returning Stateside, Lt. Col. Gregory Boyington received his Medal of Honor at the hands of President Truman.

The text of the citation reads:

BOYINGTON, GREGORY

Rank and organization: Major, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, Marine Squadron 214. Place and date: Central Solomons area, from 12 September 1943 to 3 January 1944. Entered service at: Washington. Born: 4 December 1912, Coeur

D'Alene, Idaho. Other Navy award: Navy Cross. Citation: For extraordinary heroism and valiant devotion to duty as commanding officer of Marine Fighting Squadron 214 in action against enemy Japanese forces in the Central Solomons area from 12 September 1943 to 3 January 1944. Consistently outnumbered throughout successive hazardous flights over heavily defended hostile territory, Maj. Boyington struck at the enemy with daring and courageous persistence, leading his squadron into combat with devastating results to Japanese shipping, shore installations, and aerial forces. Resolute in his efforts to inflict crippling damage on the enemy, Maj. Boyington led a formation of 24 fighters over Kahili on 17 October and, persistently circling the airdrome where 60 hostile aircraft were grounded, boldly challenged the Japanese to send up planes. Under his brilliant command, our fighters shot down 20 enemy craft in the ensuing action without the loss of a single ship. A superb airman and determined fighter against overwhelming odds, Maj. Boyington personally destroyed 26 of the many Japanese planes shot down by his squadron and, by his forceful leadership, developed the combat readiness in his command which was a distinctive factor in the Allied aerial achievements in this vitally strategic area.

Pappy Boyington has been accredited with downing six aircraft with the AVG and another 22 aircraft with the Marines, giving him a total of 28 victories (VMF-214 ended the war with 127 victories). Several photos have been taken of Boyington in *Corsair* No. 883 so this is believed to be at least one of his aircraft.

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4. *Corsair Aces*, Walter A. Musciano, ARCO Pub., 1979.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William J. Bennett backed into aviation historical research from his hobby of making model airplanes. He has been interested in airplanes for as far back as he can remember. Not quite realizing what he was getting into, back in 1969, Bill decided to research all of the Medal of Honor aviators and their aircraft when he learned that three of his models already built were of M.O.H. recipients' aircraft. Since that time with varying degrees of intensity, Bill has been writing letters and gathering data for his RP-6910 reports. He said that he was too far into it now to back out. Of the 98 recipients and the 89 aircraft on his list, he has already identified 78 aircraft by serial number and is hard on the trail for the rest. Due to the time and effort expended for research and writing, he hardly has time for his model building.

In civilian life, Bill has worked in quality assurance for Hughes Aircraft Co. for over 33 years and is still there. He has also accrued over 36 years of active and reserve duty in the USAF. Bill's last assignment was with the 146th Tactical Airlift Wing, Ca. ANG, as the Wing historian and had so much fun that he didn't want to retire. "It was like giving the fox his own key to the hen house," he said. But he was retired anyway on 26 June 1989 upon hitting three-score years. Bill is married and makes his home in Gardena, Calif., and both he and his wife are native Californians.

