

JOSEPH JACOB FOSS

NAVAL HISTORY DIVISION

One of the United States' outstanding aces of World War II and holder of the Nation's highest military award - the Medal of Honor - and former Governor of the State of South Dakota, Joseph Jacob Foss is now a Brigadier General in the South Dakota Air National Guard. He resigned his commission as Major in the U. S. Marine Corps Reserve to accept appointment as Lieutenant Colonel in the Air National Guard on September 20, 1946. He was promoted to Colonel on September 20, 1950, and on October 12, 1953, was advanced to the rank of Brigadier General in the South Dakota Air National Guard.

In the rank of a Marine Reserve Captain, he was presented the Medal of Honor by the late President Franklin D. Roosevelt at ceremonies at the White House on May 18, 1943. The citation which accompanied the award follows:

"For outstanding heroism and courage above and beyond the call of duty as Executive Officer of a Marine Fighting Squadron at Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. Engaging in almost daily combat with the enemy from October 9 to November 19, Captain Foss personally shot down twenty-three Japanese planes and damaged others so severely that their destruction was extremely probable. In addition, during this period, he successfully led a large number of escort missions, skillfully covering reconnaissance, bombing and photographic planes as well as surface craft. On January 15, 1943, he added three more enemy planes to his already brilliant successes for a record of aerial combat achievement unsurpassed in this war. Boldly searching out an approaching enemy force on January 25, Captain Foss led his eight Marine planes and four Army planes into action, and, undaunted by tremendously superior numbers, intercepted and struck with such force that four Japanese fighters were shot down and the bombers were turned back without releasing a single bomb. His remarkable flying skill, inspiring leadership and indomitable fighting spirit were distinctive factors in the defense of strategic American positions on Guadalcanal."

John Jacob Foss was born in April 17, 1915, on a farm near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. His father, a farmer of Norwegian ancestry, was killed in an automobile accident during a storm in 1933. His mother, of Scotch-Irish descent, was Mary Lacey.

Following his graduation from high school in Sioux Falls, he attended Augustana College for one year and had three semesters at Sioux Falls College. He then enrolled at the University of South Dakota, in Vermillion, and was graduated in 1940 with a degree in Business Administration. In college he fought on the boxing team, was a member of the track team and Varsity Rifle Team, and received military training as a member of the Reserve Officer Training Corps Unit. In September 1939 he joined the 147th Division of the Army Field Artillery of the South Dakota National Guard.

The future "Ace" first became interested in flying when a squadron of Marine flyers staged an air show at Sioux Falls in 1932. Three years later he had his first airplane ride, paying \$5.00 to go up with a barnstormer. In 1937 he paid \$65. on the installment plan for his first course in flying. Now and then he rented a Taylorcraft. In 1939 he took a Civil Aeronautics Authority flying course at the University of South Dakota, and before graduation had 100 hours of flying to his credit.

He served in the South Dakota National Guard from October 1939 to March 1940. Three months later he hitch-hiked to Minneapolis to enlist in the Marine Corps Reserve. Of the 28 men applying, only two were accepted on June 14, 1940, and assigned to inactive duty. In August 1940 he accepted appointment as an aviation cadet in the Reserve, and later that month was called to active duty and sent to the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida, for flight training. He completed advance training at Miami, won his Marine wings and was commissioned Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve on March 31, 1941. He was advanced to First Lieutenant while serving as an instructor at Pensacola on April 10, 1942, and was promoted to Captain on August 11, 1942, at Camp Kearney, California.

Foss arrived at Guadalcanal in September 1942 and became a Marine Ace on October 29. Flying almost daily for one month, he shot down 23 enemy planes during that period. Bagging three more later raised his total to 26, which tied the World War I record of the noted Captain Eddie Rickenbacker and set a new record for World War II. His 26 planes included 20 Zero fighters, four bombers and two bi-planes. While at Guadalcanal he was forced to make three dead stick landing on Henderson Field as a result of enemy bullets crippling his engine. In November he was shot down over the island of Malaita after accounting for three Xeros himself. Not a good swimmer, he had trouble getting ashore. Rescued from the water by natives in a small boat, he learned from them that had he been able to swim, the direction in which he was headed would have carried him to a crocodile-infested beach.

He received the Distinguished Flying Cross from Admiral William F. Halsey, USN, for his heroism and extraordinary achievement in shooting down six enemy Zeros and one enemy bomber in aerial combat during the period October 13 to 20, 1942.

Returning to the United States in April 1943, he reported to Marine Corps Headquarters, Washington, D. C., and the next month was sent on a tour of Navy Pre-flight schools and Naval Air Stations where Marines were in training. After his 30-day rehabilitation leave, he went on a bond-selling tour of the United States, after which he became engaged in a vital training assignment. He returned to the Pacific in February 1944, having been promoted to Major on June 1, 1943, and became Squadron Commander of Marine Fighting Squadron 115. He served in the combat zone in the vicinity of Emirau, St. Mathias Group, but failed to better his "Shoot-down" record.

In September 1944 he was ordered to Klamath Falls, Oregon, and in February 1945 became Operations and Training Officer at the Santa Barbara, California, Marine Corps Air Station. With the end of the war in August of that year, he requested release from active duty. His terminal leave began in October, but he was soon ordered to Iowa to appear at Navy Day ceremonies in four cities of that state. Finally relieved of active duty on December 8, 1945, he remained in the Marine Corps Reserve in inactive duty status until his resignation for service in the South Dakota Air National Guard.

In 1948 he began a political career and won election to the South Dakota House of Representatives. Two years later he made an unsuccessful bid in the Republican gubernatorial primary. He returned to the State Legislature and in

June 1954 won an overwhelming victory for the nomination of Governor of his native state. He was elected the following November and again in 1956, serving two terms with distinction.

In addition to the Medal of Honor and Distinguished Flying Cross, Major Foss has the Ribbon for the Presidential Unit Citation (Fourth Marine Division, Reinforced); the American Defense Service Medal; American Campaign Medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three engagement stars; and the World War II Victory Medal.

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