



**Joe J. Foss, Brigadier General, USAF**  
"Joe"

Date of Designation: 31 March 1941 NA # 7290

Dates of Active Duty: 31 March 1941 - 8 December 1945

Combat Tours:

WW II: VMF, Guadalcanal/Solomon Islands, Sep. 1942 - Apr. 1943.  
CO, VMF-115, Emirau, St. Mathias Group. Feb. 1944 - Sep. 1944

Combat Awards:

Congressional Medal of Honor  
Distinguished Flying Cross  
Presidential Unit Citation

### **Duty Assignment Chronology**

Joseph Jacob Foss, one of the United States' outstanding aces of World War II and holder of the Nation's highest military award--the Medal of Honor--served two terms as Governor of the State of South Dakota, from January 1955 to January 1959.

As a Marine Reserve Captain, he was presented the Medal of Honor by the late President Franklin D. Roosevelt at ceremonies in the White House on May 18, 1943. The citation accompanying the award states: "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, 1942, 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."

Joseph Foss was born April 17, 1915, on a farm near Sioux Falls, S. D. His father, Frank O. Foss, 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 at Sioux Falls, Joe Foss attended Augustana College for one year and Sioux Falls College for three semesters. He then enrolled at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, and graduated in 1940 with a degree in Business Administration. In college he fought on the boxing team and was a member of the track and football teams. His father had taught him to box, to ride a horse, and to shoot.

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 five dollars 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 by the time he was graduated from college he had 100 hours of flying to his credit.

While in college, he served in the South Dakota National Guard from October 1939 to March 1940. Three months later he hitchhiked to Minneapolis to enlist in the Marine Corps Reserve. Of the 28 men applying, only he and another were

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accepted on June 14, 1940 and assigned to inactive duty.

Honorably discharged from the Reserve on August 8, 1940, he accepted an appointment as an aviation cadet in the Marine Corps Reserve the following day. He was called to active duty August 23 and sent to Pensacola, Florida, for training. He completed further training at Miami, won his Marine wings and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve on March 31 1941. He was advanced to first lieutenant April 10, 1942 while serving as an instructor at Pensacola and was promoted to captain August 11, 1942 at Camp Kearney, California.

Captain Foss arrived at Guadalcanal in September 1942 and became a Marine Corps 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, Captain Foss was forced to make three dead-stick landings 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 Zeros himself. Not being a good swimmer, he had trouble getting ashore. He was picked out of the water by natives in a small boat and learned from them that, had he been able to swim, the direction in which he was headed would have carried him to a place on the beach that was infested with crocodiles .

Captain Foss received the Distinguished Flying Cross from Admiral William F. Halsey for his heroism and extraordinary achievement in shooting down six Zeros and one bomber from October 13 to 30, 1942.

Returning to the United States in April 1943, he reported at Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, D. C., and the following month was sent on a tour of Navy preflight schools and Naval Air Stations where Marines were in training. After his 30-day rehabilitation leave, he went on a bondselling tour of the United States. Next he became engaged in a training assignment. He was promoted to major on June 1, 1943.

Back in the Pacific in February 1944 Major Foss became - squadron commander of Marine Fighting Squadron 115. He served in the combat zone around Emirau, St. Mathias Group, but failed to better his "shoot-down" record.

Major Foss returned to the United States in September 1944 and was ordered to Klamath Falls, Oregon . In February 1945, he became operations and training officer at the Marine Corps Air Station, Santa Barbara, California.

With the end of the war in August 1945, he requested to be released to inactive duty. He went on terminal leave in October but was ordered to Iowa that month to appear at Navy Day ceremonies in four cities there. Finally relieved

from active duty on December 8, 1945, he was retained in the Marine Corps Reserve on inactive duty.

Major Foss was appointed a lieutenant colonel in the South Dakota Air National Guard in September 1946. Therefore he tendered his resignation from the Marine Corps Reserve on January 29, 1947. It was accepted effective September 19, 1946, the day prior to his acceptance of the Air National Guard commission. On September 20, 1950, he was promoted to colonel; and on October 129 1953, was advanced to the rank of brigadier general in the South Dakota Air National Guard.

In 1948 the future governor went into politics and won an election to the State (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 gubernatorial nomination. He was elected Governor of South Dakota the following November, and two years later was re-elected. In 1960 he was named Commissioner of the American Football League.

In addition to the Medal of Honor and Distinguished Flying Cross, Governor Foss' decorations and medals include: the Presidential Unit Citation, American- Defense Service Medal, American Campaign Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three bronze stars, and the World War II Victory Medal.

Governor Foss and his wife, the former June Shakstad of Sioux Falls, have two daughters, Cheryl June and Mary Jo, and a son, Joseph Frank. Another son, Joseph Jacob, Jr., died at birth in 1945.

### **Summary of Significant Career Events**

- (1) Credited with shooting down 26 enemy aircraft which tied the World War I record of the noted Captain Eddie Rickenbacker and set a new record for World War II. The 26 planes included 20 Zero fighters, four bombers, and two bi-planes.