

Joseph Jacob Foss- Governor, War Hero, Sportsman 1915-2003

Joseph Jacob Foss was born on April 17, 1915, on a farm near Sioux Falls, S.D. He a Medal of Honor winner as a Marine fighter pilot in World War II was a two-term governor of South Dakota, commissioner of the upstart American Football League and head of the National Rifle Association,. He also organized the South Dakota Air National Guard and commanded a squadron.

Mr. Foss indulged his lifelong passion for hunting and fishing as host of "The American Sportsman" on ABC.

Mr. Foss inspired the nation as a wartime ace. Flying a Wildcat that was slower than the vaunted Japanese Zeros, he shot down 26 fighters and bombers in the battle for Guadalcanal from October 1942 to January 1943. With his 26th "kill," he became the first American pilot of World War II to equal Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker's record in World War I.

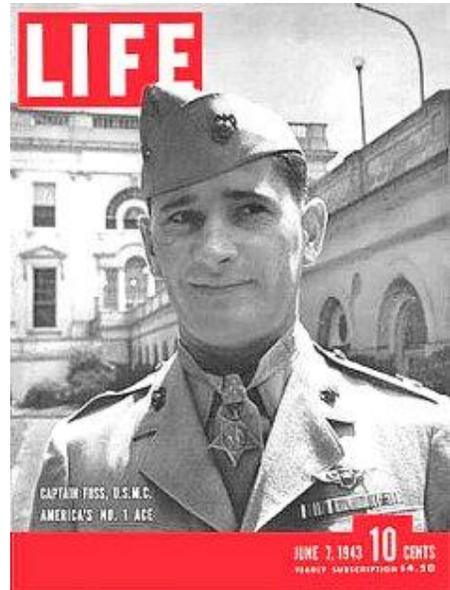
Captain Foss was brought home in the spring of 1943 to receive the Medal of Honor from President Franklin D. Roosevelt and to go on a national tour to sell war bonds, spur military recruiting and inspire workers in war plants. Thrilling an America still reeling from Pearl Harbor, Captain Foss was pictured in his dress uniform on the cover of Life on June 7, 1943, described as "America's No. 1 Ace."

Flying out of Henderson Field over the next three months, Captain Foss and his fliers, a band known as Joe's Flying Circus for its acrobatic maneuvers, played a major role in defending Guadalcanal.

Early in November, while Captain Foss was strafing Japanese ships 150 miles north of Guadalcanal, machine-gun fire from a Japanese plane pierced his engine and shattered his canopy, narrowly missing the aviator's head. When the engine quit, Captain Foss ditched the plane in the ocean. It quickly sank. He freed himself and struggled in his life jacket for five hours in a rainstorm while sharks circled him. Finally, members of a Catholic mission from the island of Malaita, who were paddling by in canoes, rescued him.

In April 1943, stricken with malaria, Captain Foss went home. At a White House ceremony, President Roosevelt gave him the Medal of Honor, citing "outstanding heroism and courage" on his many missions to defend Guadalcanal. He also received the Silver Star, Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.

When the Korean War broke out, the Marines recalled him, and he was a colonel who directed training.



He was elected to the South Dakota Legislature as a Republican in 1948. Six years later, at 39, he was elected the youngest governor in the history of the state. After serving two two-year terms, he ran for Congress against George McGovern, the future Democratic presidential nominee, who was seeking a second term in the House of Representatives.

Mr. McGovern, also a highly decorated pilot in the war, defeated him.

The airfield at the Sioux Falls airport was named after him.

