



## **FOSS, JOSEPH JACOB**

**RANK AND ORGANIZATION: CAPTAIN, U.S. MARINE CORPS RESERVE,  
MARINE FIGHTING SQUADRON 121, 1ST MARINE AIRCRAFT WING.**

**PLACE AND DATE: OVER GUADALCANAL, 9 OCTOBER TO 19  
NOVEMBER 1942, 15 AND 23 JANUARY 1943.**

**ENTERED SERVICE AT: SOUTH DAKOTA**

**BORN: 17 APRIL 1915, SIOUX FALLS, S. DAK.  
BRIGADIER GENERAL FOSS DIED 1 JANUARY 2003**

### **CITATION:**

FOR OUTSTANDING HEROISM AND COURAGE ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY AS EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF MARINE FIGHTING SQUADRON 121, 1ST MARINE AIRCRAFT WING, AT GUADALCANAL. ENGAGING IN ALMOST DAILY COMBAT WITH THE ENEMY FROM 9 OCTOBER TO 19 NOVEMBER 1942, CAPT. FOSS PERSONALLY SHOT DOWN 23 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 15 JANUARY 1943, HE ADDED 3 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 25 JANUARY, CAPT. FOSS LED HIS 8 F-4F MARINE PLANES AND 4 ARMY P-38 'S INTO ACTION AND, UNDAUNTED BY TREMENDOUSLY SUPERIOR NUMBERS, INTERCEPTED AND STRUCK WITH SUCH FORCE THAT 4 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 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, was born 17 April 1915, on a farm near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Following his graduation from high school in 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. The future Marine 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 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 accepted on 14 June 1940 and assigned to inactive duty.

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

Captain Foss arrived at Guadalcanal in September 1942 and became a Marine Corps ace on 29 October. 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 Capt 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, Capt 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 Adm William F. Halsey for his heroism and extraordinary achievement in shooting down six Zeros and one bomber from 13 October to 30 October 1942.

Returning to the United States in April 1943, he reported to Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., and was presented the Medal of Honor by President Franklin D. Roosevelt at ceremonies in the White House on 18 May 1943. Also in May of 1943, he was sent on a tour of Navy preflight schools and Naval Air Stations where Marines underwent training. After his 30-day rehabilitation leave, he went on a bond-selling tour of the United States and then he became engaged in a training assignment. He was promoted to major on 1 June 1943.

Back in the Pacific in February 1944, Maj Foss was appointed 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. Maj 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 8 December 1945, he was retained in the Marine Corps Reserve on inactive duty. Maj Foss was appointed a lieutenant colonel in the South Dakota Air National Guard in September 1946. He tendered his resignation from the Marine Corps Reserve on 29 January 1947. It was accepted effective 19 September 1946, the day prior to his acceptance of the Air National Guard commission. On 20 September 1953, he 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 South Dakota's State 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 was re-elected two years later.

In 1960 he was named as the first commissioner of the American Football League and served in that position until 1966. From 1988 through 1990 he served as president of the National Rifle Association.

Brigadier General Foss died 1 January 2003 at a hospital near his home in Scottsdale, Arizona, following a stroke. He was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia.

In addition to the Medal of Honor and Distinguished Flying Cross, his 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.