



# "Old" Joe Foss

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"Old" Joe Foss once shot down Japanese Zeros the way he used to shoot down pheasant in South Dakota, where they learn, at an early age, to shoot and talk straight.

Now, at age 84, retired Air National Guard Brigadier General Joseph Jacob Foss—winner of the Medal of Honor, World War II Marine flying ace and former governor of South Dakota—sits behind a big western belt buckle and bolo tie and says in a bold voice: "I'm here today compliments of the Lord, not by my great ability. I'm the most fortunate guy in the world. I've had one miracle after another in my life. I crashed once into a herd of Holsteins, and the Lord took care of me 'cause I didn't hit one of 'em."

The Holsteins came many crashes and many years after Foss fought in the Pacific. They do, however, serve as a reference

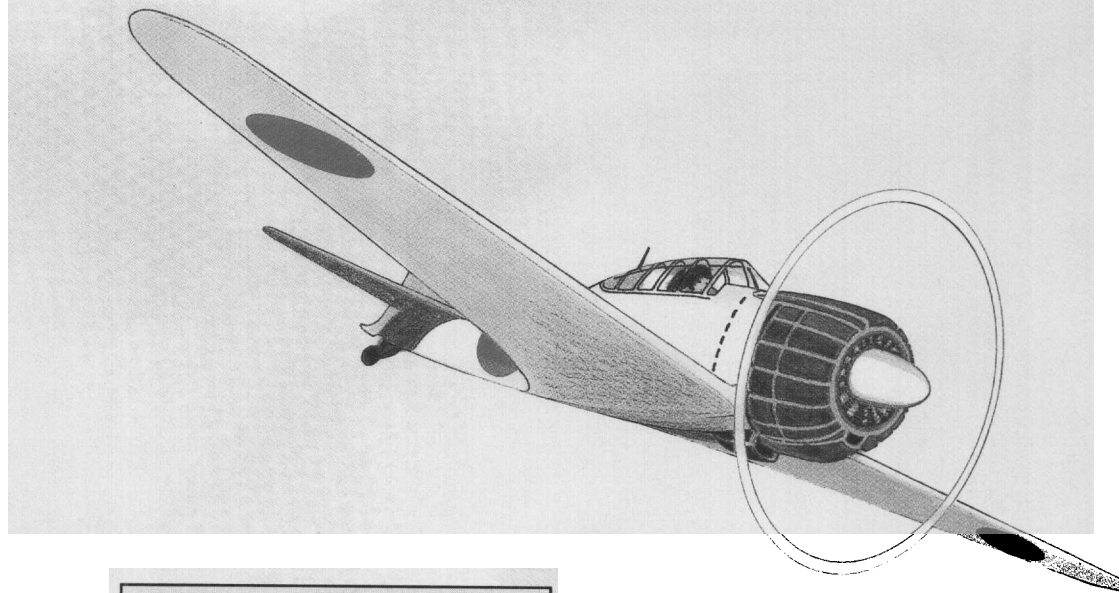
point to bring one full circle in the life of a man who started with cattle and farming, went to war, flew fighter planes and came back again.

Foss was born to Norwegian and Scotch-Irish parents on a farm three miles east of Sioux Falls. His first crash with cattle came when he and his brother Clifford mounted an "old nag" and took off after strays. "[The horse] was going full throttle; I couldn't stop him. When we reached the gate, he put on his brakes. It was the world's most decisive stop."

Clifford broke his arm. Joe landed rough, but in one piece. And that set the tone for his future adventures.

It also got Joe to thinking that farming might not be for him. His father had been killed in a farming accident, and Joe, then a junior in high school, worked the farm for four years before

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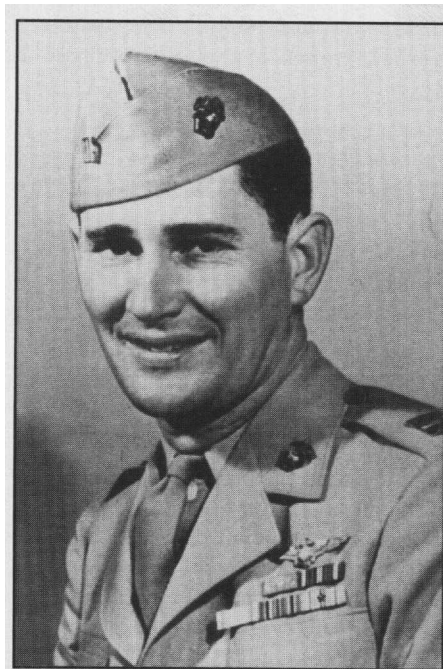
giving it over to his brother. "I went off to college, got my degree and I've never been sorry."

He had wanted to be a Marine since the eighth grade. Even more than that, he wanted to be a pilot. Back in 1931, Marine aviators breezed into Sioux Falls to put on an aerial stunt exhibition. Foss said, "[The exhibition] really impressed me. I even met the pilots. You know the amazing thing? Those four lieutenants flying those airplanes were later, at one time or another, my commanding officers during World War II."

It was only a matter of time before young Joe reached in his coveralls and shelled out five bucks for his first plane ride in a "bucket of bolts." After that, he reached for the sky. He took extra jobs pumping gas and playing the alto saxophone for the municipal band to pay for flying lessons. By the time he graduated from the University of South Dakota's School of Business Administration, he'd logged more than 100 hours.

While in college, Foss joined the Army National Guard in 1937. "I was with the 147th Field Artillery, so I know what it is like to be down at the end of the totem pole. In the old days, if you were a private you didn't get in on all that was going on. You really didn't care. You wanted to enjoy things as much as you could. I really enjoyed it. It was like being a second lieutenant.

"When I was in college, one of my close friends went into the Marine Corps, and he came back telling all these great things. He had his wings too. Boy, I couldn't wait to get out of college.



"To me, flying was always like walking. It came natural," recalled Capt Joseph Jacob Foss who, at the "ripe old age" of 27, flew the Grumman F4F Wildcat and shot down 26 enemy aircraft.

I went straight to the Marine Corps the day I graduated."

In 1940, with \$5 in his pocket, Foss hitchhiked 300 miles to Minneapolis and volunteered for the Marines. A few months later, with \$6.87 in his pocket, he hitchhiked to the naval air station at Pensacola, Fla.

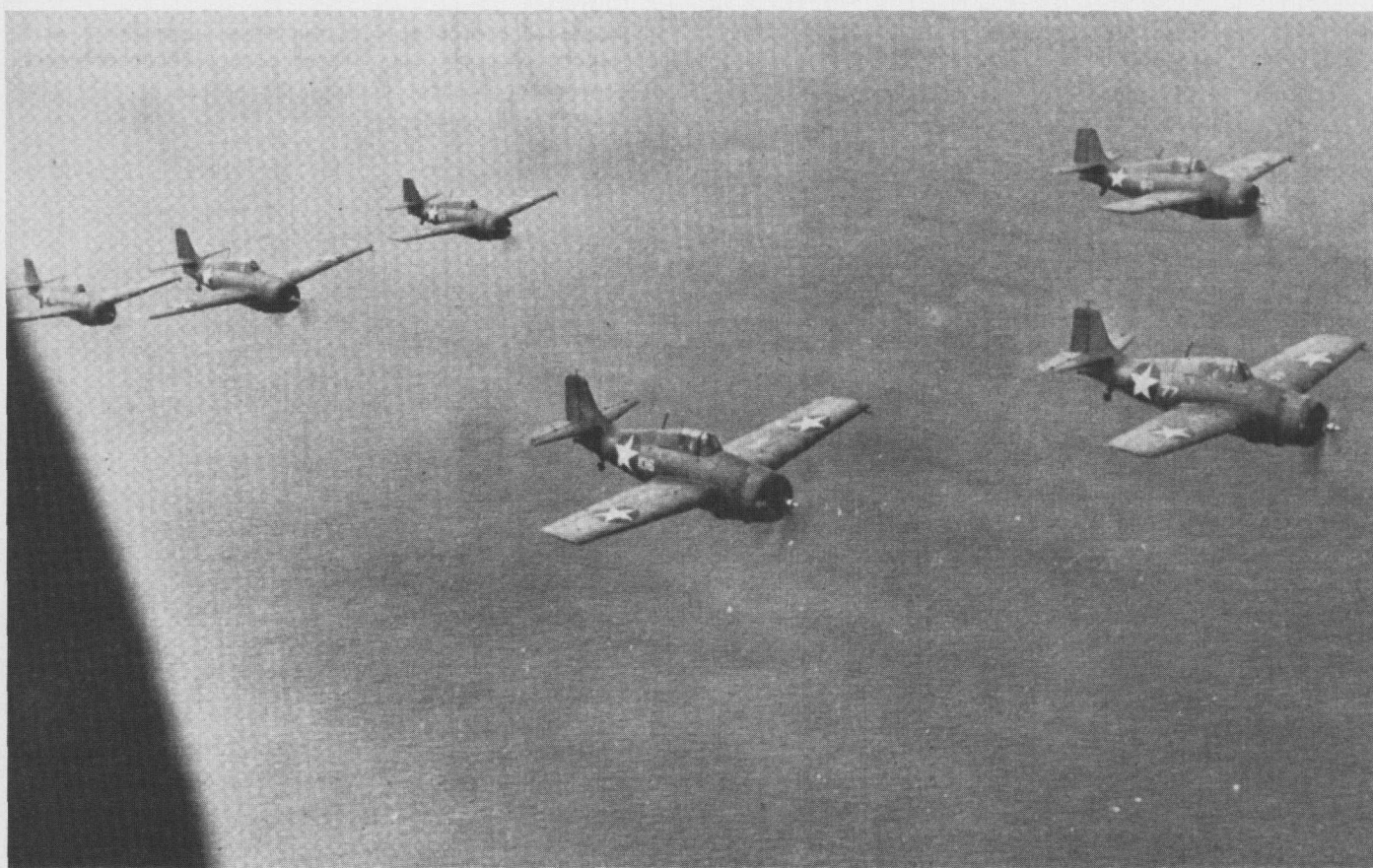
"To me, flying was always like walking. It came natural." Apparently, his commanding officers thought so too. Once Foss was commissioned as a Reserve officer, he earned his wings, was promoted rapidly to captain and became a flight instructor. While teaching others, he found that flying is not "natural" to all. "Once I [and a student] went into a spin, almost hit another plane and dove into the ground. Both of us were covered with black and blue marks. That taught me to stay wide awake."

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Foss—like every red-blooded American—wanted to go where the action was. Foss's commanders refused his

requests for transfer saying that, at 27 years of age, Foss was too old. "'Too damned ancient' were the words they used."

However, men with Foss's unique skills are always needed in war. By September 1942, Old Joe Foss was on Guadalcanal. There, he was joined by men who similarly possessed his skills as a Grumman F4F Wildcat pilot of Marine Fighter Squadron 121.

Anyone who flew off Henderson Field on Guadalcanal remembers its pockmarked landscape. "Besides the craters,



These Grumman fighters, flown by Foss and other Marines in the "Flying Circus" of VMF-121, were on the prowl for Japanese over the South Pacific.

there were foxholes and slit trenches and many wrecked planes. It wasn't much more than a cow pasture hacked out of the jungle," Foss said.

But in late 1941, it was the center of war in the Pacific. Everything was riding on the Navy offshore and the Marines fighting under the thick jungle canopy with Marine flyers fighting for them in the air.

"Twice, the enemy fleet came in and went back and forth firing at us, and we couldn't do a thing about it," remembered Foss. "We were right in the middle of the impact area. They started firing right around 9:30 p.m., October 12, and, as I recall, never stopped until 4:30 the next morning. We were under 14-inch guns and bombs from their airplanes all night.

"A lot of people had gotten killed. We were down to seven fighters, and there were only two or three TBF (Grumman Avenger torpedo bomber) planes that were able to fly. But, our men were magicians at fixing them up while our troops up in the trenches were fighting tooth and toenail to keep the enemy from breaking through. A month later, the Japanese bombed the island again.

"They were raising Cain, and we wanted to get 'em. War is not safe. People who have never lived it don't realize how tough it really is. When you're fighting for your country, you go above and be-

yond. You just get a fire under you. A man or woman has to be so dedicated that your life doesn't mean anything to you."

**F**oss had not come to the Pacific to dodge Japanese explosives. He was a fighter pilot who bagged his first Zero four days after arriving in the Solomons. Japanese pilots took it personally and chased him back to the "Canal."

"Somewhere in the scrape, I took a round in the oil pump, and my engine burned out. It was a long drive back to Henderson Field with three Zeros on my tail. I didn't dare to slow up for an approach and came in like a rocket.

"They rolled out an ambulance to pick up the pieces, but I was lucky enough to stop before I hit the stumps at the end of the runway."

He launched again the next day and shot down another Zero. Five days later, he splashed three more and became an ace. In four weeks of aerial combat, flight leader Foss and his "Flying Circus" of seven other Marines blasted 47 of Japan's best fighter pilots and their aircraft from the skies over the South Pacific. Foss was credited with downing 23. He would eventually equal World War I ace Eddie Rickenbacker by shooting down 26 enemy aircraft.

"I'd learned to shoot good in South

Dakota, but I still got shot down four times. I just got the most breaks."

Foss explained: "I got shot up quite a bit and people always ask, 'Were you afraid?' Yeah. You see, they always had us outnumbered, usually six to one. The Zero was faster and more maneuverable. What we had was firepower and durability. If we hit a Zero, he was in trouble.

"We used a formation called a scissors weave, which allowed us to see and point our guns in all ways like a cactus. There was no way they could touch you without the cactus exploding with six .50-caliber guns blasting from each airplane. So, the enemy would break off sometimes. Other times they'd bear in and we'd get 'em on a head-on pass, which would make anybody nervous.

"When that airplane blows up, it's a dangerous thing. Pieces of junk fly in all directions. That engine is a free agent and just goes wild weasel. You don't know where the thing is going to go.

"There was one man I shot down who jumped out the second I hit his airplane. I almost flew into him. You know, I met that guy later, and he claims he shot me down twice before I shot him down.

"In the excitement of the whole thing, you are charged up and always ready to go. No one ever refused a mission, at least not in my outfit. We all expected to survive. We never gave a thought that by



tomorrow one or two of us could be gone. In the Battle of Savo Island, my flight was the decoy that went over to draw the enemy fire [by diving] on a battleship. Looking back, that seems like a silly thing for grown men to do, but we did it. We caught all the fire.

"I think that was the mission on which I was most scared: flying over the enemy fleet and then diving right into the middle of it. I thought I might be able to walk on the lead from the pom-pom guns shooting at me from the deck of that battleship. There were just rows and rows of them. I was coming absolutely straight down, and they were shooting a few feet or inches under the belly of my plane.

"I got so interested in watching my .50-caliber bullets bounce off the deck that I almost flew into the ship. At the last second, I missed the superstructure and came down over the water. My seven boys that were following almost did the same thing, but all made it alive. That's what I call a hairy dog mission."

The mission that Foss recalls the most was "19 November 1942. That was almost the end of Old Joe. I sank with the airplane."

Foss and his Marines launched to stop Japanese destroyers and cargo ships from resupplying their troops who were starving on Guadalcanal. They spotted the ships steaming off Florida Island. Foss said, "Low and behold, there were six Zeros right beneath us. They never saw us."

It was too tempting a target. Foss said to his men, "Let's take 'em."

Then it turned into what Foss recalls as "a strange mission. One of my men, Danny Doyle, kept chasing a Zero. Maybe his guns jammed, because he didn't shoot. He just kept chasing that airplane. He chased it into a dive. He had the altitude and was traveling like greased lightening. He ran right into the Zero. So, I lost Danny Doyle.

"We didn't lose any time. We just, boom, shot those Zeros down."

Foss's flight gained altitude, climbing to join with the torpedo planes and dive bombers to attack the Japanese flotilla. "I popped out of the clouds right over the edge of the enemy ships, and they were firing on my tail-end Charlie. So, we started peeling off when this Zero came out of the soup right in front of me.

"I made a shot at him and that was a mistake." Foss overshot the Zero—nearly colliding with it. "Of course, as I went by I got drilled." Foss made a quick check. Everything seemed to be working, so he brought his plane around. "I came up and made a belly shot that

brought him down. Another Zero came out of the soup." Foss got that one too. "But, just then my engine quit." He pulled the throttle back, shoved it on and the engine cranked over, but only enough to tease him. It sputtered out once again. All the while, Foss was very aware of the altitude he was losing. "I knew I wasn't going to be making a run on the ships. I just wanted to get out of there as fast as I could."

Foss broke off and made his run for Henderson Field. What he hadn't initially noticed were the Zeros that followed. "A whole flock of 'em. But, I slid into the soup. It was solid storm. The clouds saved me. They didn't come in after me. I had gotten by on the hair of my chin."

Almost. While Foss may have shaken the Japanese, his Wildcat's stops and starts were numerous, and each time they occurred closer together. His altitude dropped lower and lower. It was obvious the law of gravity was not about to be repelled.

Foss looked for an island. "Three of the four times I was shot down, I landed at Henderson Field, which was lucky because I don't know how to swim—and didn't then [either]."

There was another problem. It was nearly dark, and odds on being seen were getting longer.

He spotted an island and swung in as close as possible hoping the island wasn't occupied by the Japanese. "I hit the water with a real bang. I made two serious mistakes. I didn't jettison the canopy and I didn't get totally out of my chute, and here I was in trouble because of it."

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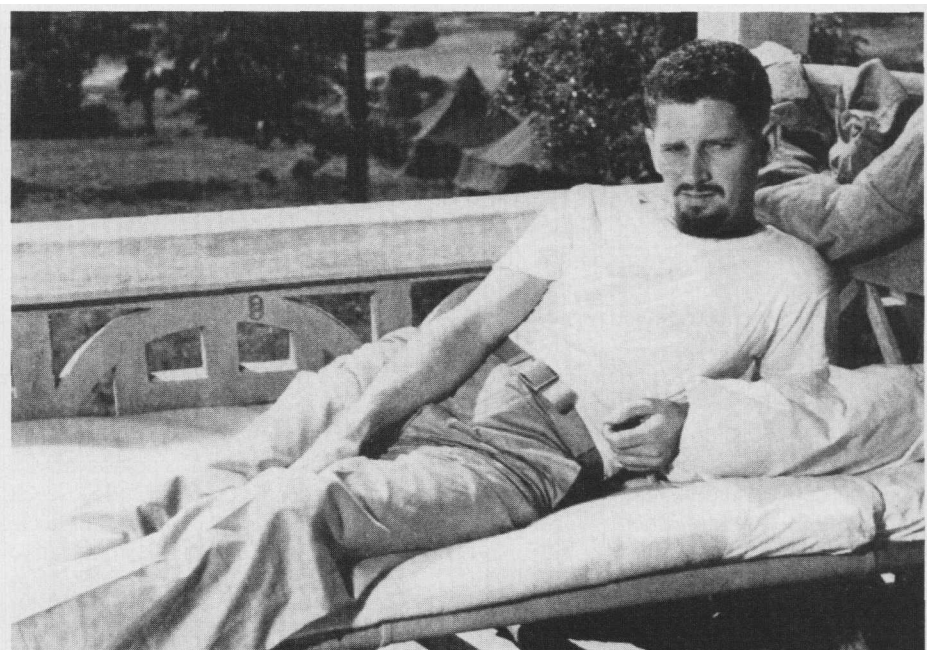
'Poor Old Joe's gone.' "

His canopy, which was open, slammed shut when the plane hit the water. "The safety catch caught it and water rushed in. It was like being under Niagara Falls. I started breathing it. I was drowning, plain and simple. I floated up because I had that chute under my butt and the silk was buoyant."

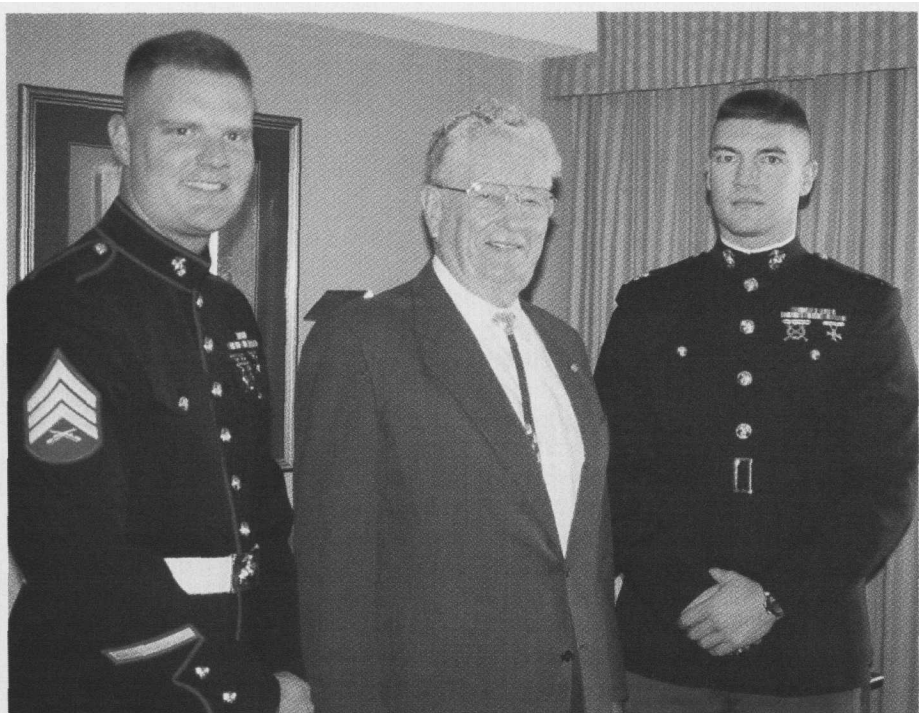
He managed to get the canopy open. "The plane was going straight down. My whole life was passing by me up to the point where the guys were saying, 'Poor Old Joe's gone. He's shark bait.' They were dividing my gear, and I didn't like it. I finally got loose and floated up butt first with the chute still on. I was half conscious, coughing violently, throwing up, just having a terrible time. I got my life jacket inflated and realized the tide was going out to sea. I thought I was a gone gosling.

"Looking back on it, the chances of me getting out of that deal alive were zero. For someone to see me go in, and then to find me in the sea at night would take a miracle."

Someone did see Foss go in. The man,



Recuperating in New Caledonia from malaria, Foss dropped from 195 pounds to 160, but had time to grow a beard. When he recovered, he was sent—sans beard—back to Guadalcanal.



Foss has slowed to where life is "down to just a dull roar" and does consulting work today. A retired brigadier general in the Air National Guard, he has kept close ties to the Marine Corps. Last Christmas, he helped kick off the Corps' annual Toys for Tots campaign. Escorting him and eager to hear of the famous pilot's exploits were Sergeant David Zeltwanger (left) and Capt Kevin Troy, both of Inspector-Instructor, Rations Company, Detachment A, 4th Supply Battalion, Fourth Marine Division, Washington, D.C.

a native of Malaita Island, ran to a mission run by Catholic priests and nuns. "He told them there was a bird man out there, which was me."

The miracle came in the form of an outrigger canoe with a Dutch priest and an on-the-lamb Australian mill operator. "It was pitch-dark, and I didn't see the outrigger until it was right there. I was convinced by the sounds that they were the enemy, so I let them go right by me. Pretty soon I heard this voice say, 'Let's look over 'ere.' I knew that was a limey voice, so I said in a roar that could of been heard in New York, 'Yeah! Right here!' The next thing I know, a hand reaches down belonging to the priest. They rescued me and took the parachute. The nuns made it into vestments of the church, which I understand are still there. The good Lord saved me. I had nothing to do with it."

**B**ut, it was Foss's tenacity that kept him going. "I grew fond of going at the Zeros head on, as if attempting to ram them. On a head-on approach, we usually got a good shot when the Zero slow-rolled, looped or made a climbing turn to avoid our attack.

"I remember [Lieutenant] Colonel [Harold W.] 'Joe' Bauer issued this order: 'When you see Zeros, dogfight 'em!' We did. I worked with a lot of fellows, but I've never encountered a gang with such spirit. They were a team out to

win, and they just couldn't be beaten."

Foss remembers them all. It is impossible that he would ever forget them: Bill Marontate, Greg "Little Nemo" Loesch, "Old" Rog Haberman, "Big" Bill Freeman, Oscar Bate, Thomas "Boot" Furlow and Frank "Skeezix" Presley.

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"Five men who were original members of the flight or had been with it at one time are now gone: Danny Doyle, Casey Brandon, Joe Palko, Andy Andrews and Gene Nuwer. They gave their lives for this country."

Foss went on to Washington, D.C., where President Franklin D. Roosevelt hung the Medal of Honor around his neck.

The Corps released him from active service as a major. "I wanted to get a regular commission in the Marine Corps. But, they had some dumb rule, and when I applied they said I was two weeks too old."

He wasn't too old for the South Dakota Air National Guard, who made him

a squadron commander. Foss also got into politics and won a seat in the state house of representatives. In 1955, he started the first of his two terms as governor of South Dakota. He has served as the first national chairman of fund-raising for the Crippled Children Society, seven years as commissioner of the American Football League and as the host of the ABC television program "American Sportsman." He retired as a brigadier general and chief of staff in his state's air guard.

"I still enjoy flying. I even had a couple of crashes: once into the side of a hill and once with those Holsteins. Every now and then somebody still lets me take a hack at it. I can still take off and land with no problem."

Today he does mostly consulting work. "I give lots of talks in the year to various organizations. They ask me to come in and talk for 10 minutes or so. But, anymore, it takes 10 minutes just to clear my throat." More recently, he was asked to be "the 'kicker-off' for the 1999 Marine Corps Reserve's Toys for Tots [program]."

Foss has kept in contact with the Corps. "The Marines are the best when it comes to getting the job done. You don't get all tangled up in paperwork in the Marine Corps. They make a decision and accomplish the mission right now. Their training is the best training program that ever existed. They are morally, spiritually, physically and every other way number one. It is the truth and no one denies it.

"I wish every American could go to the recruit depot at San Diego on graduation day. Some guys come there more or less looking like crumb bums. They go out of there like first-rate gentlemen.

"Those men I served with who were killed and who gave their lives for this country, they were martyrs who believed in this country and who believed in our system. It is because of them that I can enjoy life. I can enjoy this country, enjoy the world. At 84, there aren't many of us still going. Most are sitting in their rocking chairs somewhere. After all the things that have happened, I never have mellowed down. Life has only slowed down to just a dull roar."

"Old" Joe Foss, who once shot down Japanese Zeros the way he used to shoot down pheasant in South Dakota, still talks as straight as he used to shoot.

*Editor's note: This story is based on information from an interview conducted during the Toys for Tots Foundation campaign kick-off luncheon.*

