



JOE FOSS

Dakota Ace

“Sioux Falls Regional Airport” is one of the two official names given to the home base of South Dakota’s Air National Guard. Local Air Guardsmen, however, uniformly refer to the site by its second official name: “Joe Foss Field.” Little wonder.

Tall, cigar-chomping, curly haired Joseph Jacob Foss was without question one of America’s greatest warriors. Born in 1915 on a farm in Minnehaha County, S.D., Foss joined the Marine Corps in 1940, earned pilot’s wings in 1941, became an ace in 1942, and received the Medal of Honor in 1943.

In the desperate World War II battle for Guadalcanal, Foss commanded a small band of fighter pilots—“Joe’s Flying Circus”—who defended the island. The circus scored an eye-watering 72 aerial victories in mere weeks.

Foss himself, flying an F4F Wildcat, shot down five Japanese Zeros in a day, Oct. 25, 1942, bringing his total to 14. He went on to bag another 12 to top out at 26 victories—the most of any pilot to that point. On Nov. 7, 1942, Foss was hit, landed in the Pacific, and spent hours in shark-infested waters before being rescued.

Foss returned home a true national hero, the “ace of aces.” His Medal of Honor citation praised his “remarkable flying skill, inspiring leadership, and indomitable fighting spirit.”

In 1946, Major Foss left USMC, but his martial career wasn’t over. He was com-

missioned a lieutenant colonel in the newly created Air National Guard and helped organize South Dakota’s ANG unit.

Foss was recalled to Active Duty, as an Air Force colonel, during the Korean War. Later he became chief of staff of the South Dakota ANG and retired as a brigadier general in 1975.

Foss was a restless person who, after World War II, posted a nearly unbelievable record of civilian achievement. First, he became a successful businessman. Then Foss moved into politics, was elected to South Dakota legislature, and served two terms—1955-59—as a popular governor.

Foss worked with Dallas oil man Lamar Hunt in 1960 to found the upstart American Football League; he served as commissioner for six years. At the same time, Foss served as the National President and Board Chairman of the Air Force Association and hosted the ABC TV show, “The American Sportsman.”

Later, Foss became president of the National Rifle Association; president of National Society of Crippled Children and Adults; executive of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines; and inductee into the National Aviation Hall of Fame.

In 1955, Sioux Falls gave the local airport its second title. Today, Joe Foss Field is home to the South Dakota Air National Guard’s 114th Fighter Wing, an F-16 unit. A statue of Foss can be found in the main lobby.

JOSEPH JACOB FOSS

Born: April 17, 1915, Minnehaha County, S.D.

Died: Jan. 1, 2003, Scottsdale, Ariz.

Occupation: US military officer, businessman, political figure, philanthropist

Services: South Dakota National Guard, US Marine Corps, Air National Guard

Era: World War II

Years of service: 1939-75 (Active, Reserve, and Guard)

Final Grade: Major (USMC) and Brigadier General (USAF)

Combat: Guadalcanal

Military Awards: Medal of Honor, Distinguished Flying Cross, Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart

Nicknames: Smokey Joe, Old Foss, Ace of Aces

College: University of South Dakota

Famous Friends: John Wayne, Lamar Hunt, Tom Brokaw, Marion Carl, Charles Lindbergh, Ted Nugent, Charlton Heston, Gregory Boyington, Oliver North, Dick Cheney

JOE FOSS FIELD

State: South Dakota

Nearest City: Sioux Falls

Alternate Name: Sioux Falls Regional Airport

Area: 2.5 sq mi / 1,570 acres

Status: Open, ANG base

Opened: 1937 as civil airport

Leased: (by Army) 1942

Original Name: Sioux Falls Army Base

Renamed: (1955) Joe Foss Field

Former Owner: US Army

Current Owner: South Dakota ANG

Home Of: 114th Fighter Wing

1. Foss at Guadalcanal. 2. F-16 of SDANG’s 114th Fighter Wing—the “Lobos”—stationed at Joe Foss Field. 3. Foss (c) with Lamar Hunt (l), owner of the AFL’s Dallas Texans, and Don Rossi, Texans general manager. 4. Joe Foss Field, S. D.

Photos: 2. ANG photo by SMSgt. Nancy Ausland; 4. Google Map data imagery 2017