

DAKOTA IMAGES

As a World War II flying ace, governor of South Dakota, advocate for the disabled, and nationally known sportsman, Joe Foss dedicated his energies full-force to serving the causes in which he believed.

Foss was born on a farm near Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on 17 April 1915. He attended Augustana College and Sioux Falls College before transferring to the University of South Dakota in 1939. While there, he fulfilled a childhood wish and enrolled in a flying course. In 1940, he graduated from the University of South Dakota School of Business Administration and enlisted in the Marine Corps. He married June Shakstad in 1942, and the couple eventually had four children.

During World War II, Foss served as the executive officer of Marine Fighting Squadron 121 in Guadalcanal, leading a Marine air unit known as Joe's Flying Circus. Of the seventy-two Japanese airplanes the unit shot down in 1942–1943, Foss destroyed twenty-six, making him the first to break the 1918 record of World War I flying ace Eddie Rickenbacker. Foss received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his military service.

Upon returning home, Foss helped to organize the South Dakota Air National Guard and later retired as a brigadier general. He served in the South Dakota Legislature from 1948 to 1953 and, at age thirty-nine, became the state's youngest governor. During his two terms in office (1955–1959), Foss was known for his straight-talking, open-door policies. Between 1956 and 1961, he was also national president of the Society of Crippled Children and Adults (forerunner to the Easter Seal Society), a special interest cultivated due to his daughter's struggle with cerebral palsy.

From 1959 to 1966, Foss served as commissioner of the American Football League, stepping aside shortly before its merger with the National Football League. He also hosted two network television shows, *The American Sportsman* and *The Outdoorsman: Joe Foss*, and was president of the National Rifle Association between 1988 and 1990.

Joe Foss died 1 January 2003 in Scottsdale, Arizona, leaving his wife Donna Wild Foss, whom he had married in 1967.

—Laura K. Ringling



Joe Foss

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