

## An Interview with Major Joe Foss, USMC

Fighter Pilot Leader Joseph Foss was born in a North Dakota farm house with no electricity . . . no telephone . . . worked 12 hours a day as a little kid . . . earned a bachelor's degree while going back and forth to help his Dad

. . . got a pilot license along the way in 1940 . . . but not until Joe's mid-twenties.

After graduation, he immediately he joined the Marine Corps and went through pilot training then advanced training in fighters. Joe's aviation skills quickly advanced. And his skills were immediately needed after the Pearl Harbor attack and became executive officer of VMF-121.

In early October, 1942 he flew his F4F Wildcat from the aircraft carrier Long Island to Guadalcanal . . . become an important part of the ' Cactus Air Force.' As Joe Foss quickly absorbed Squadron leader ' Indian Joe ' Bauer's air fight tactics : " Bore in . . . real close . . . let the enemy airplane ' fill up your wind screen ' . . . THEN shoot at it. "

A handful of days after showing up for combat . . . Joe

Foss scored his first victory . . . a Japanese Zero fighter.

And a week and a half later. . . Joe Foss was a fighter pilot Ace . . .

Then despite over five weeks in his jungle bunk puking up his guts with malaria . . . a *diapered* . . . emaciated Joe Foss incredibly T-I-E-D WW I fighter pilot Ace Eddie Rickenbacker's previous record . . . after shooting down . . . [ 26 ] TWENTY-SIX . . . enemy aircraft.

The public needed visual encouragement and incentive . . . so Joe Foss was sent back home for a war bond tour and to receive the Medal of Honor from President Franklin Roosevelt.

After a stateside stint training new ' dog fighting . . . fighter pilots . . . showing them ' what worked . . . ' Joe returned to the Pacific as Squadron Commander of VMF-115 . . . flying Corsairs.

Foss, whose autobiography, ' A Proud American : Joe Foss', includes an excellent account of his career in the " Cactus Air Force." He graciously agreed to be interviewed in order to assist in making a Combat Flight

Simulator : WW II Pacific Theatre as compelling as possible . . for an electronic simulator.

Joe Foss On Dogfighting :

" Dogfights are normally over in a matter of seconds. If you BLINK . . you could miss the dog fight.

Or during the fight . . if you ' blink ' too long . . you could die.

---From Foss' autobiography, A Proud American: Joe Foss

Foss, On What it takes to be a fighter pilot . .

" The impulse and the action must instant. Skilled fighter pilots have one thing in common . . they have quick hands ! "

The airplane becomes an extension of your body . . like an arm or a leg. If somebody's coming at your face with a ' red-hot poker ' you instinctively get out of the way. You don't have to think about it.

You instinctively just do it. "

**In the air, whoever acts . . . smartest . . . and fastest is going to be the survivor.**

**As the Red Baron said : ' It's not the airplane crate . . . it's the man sitting in there !.'**

Photo #: 80-G-11932 Marine Corps F4F "Wildcat" fighter at Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, Feb. 1943



**If it were not so .. that Grumman Wildcat would have been a flying coffin. "**

**On Saburo Sakai . . .**

**" Saburo Sakai, top surviving Japanese ace, with whom I often shared platforms at university symposiums, told me that I am his best friend in America "**

---From Foss' autobiography, *A Proud American: Joe Foss*

The truth about aerial combat : [ a Foss' talk to student fighter pilots ]

" If you're planning on this being an easy job .. you've got another think coming. You can end up dead in this line of work.

War is dangerous !

If you have any thought of chickening out .. now's the time to do it. Being any kind of pilot in enemy territory means having your life threatened on every mission ."

" After one of these talks . . . thirty-six fliers opted-out of the fighter pilot training program. He said : ' But I didn't lose any sleep over that .. in fact . . I was glad.'

Excerpted from an [ March, 2000 ] interview of Joe Foss by Jon Seal :

**Joe Foss:** (discussing the Japanese assault on Guadalcanal) : They could see everything from the air. They strafed. And there was nothing we could do.

Hey . . we were absolutely pinned down. Honestly, our anti-aircraft people weren't that good. But I can imagine it could make you nervous if you're under that kind of blitz. And perhaps you personally wouldn't stand up there and man that AA gun. It wasn't too safe.

There was no safe place on the island. And the Japanese thought they could . . just drive right in there. They'd have gotten a good reception of course . . So they'd better have some tough bozos leading the attack. But at that point . . thought they had us.

**Interviewer :** You described the shelling in your book : Two nights of non-stop shelling . . non-stop. Off duty we joined our ground troops . . going out to look for Japanese leading edge troops. However, our fighter squadron commander had better judgment . . and kept us from doing that.

**Joe Foss :** Well . . they thought they could wipe us off the island. But everybody was dedicated . . real dedicated . . I don't care whether you were ground pounder or what job you had.

They say, " How did you get the Medal of Honor

? And I said : " I was just surrounded by courageous maintenance people people . . and they made it possible . . for those of us who were up there shooting . . to produce."

" If the airplane was shot up . . hey . . we weren't going . . anyplace . . But somehow our ground guys fixed those suckers so that they would . . still go. "

They would have to frequently change the engine [ in those early days, only lasted 70-some hours.] Why ? Because you were flying at full throttle any time the plane was running. And the engines were sucking in that coral dust .. that would be just like directly 'filing' away at the engine's steel cylinders and piston rings . . and all would wear out in a hurry. "

**Interviewer :** Basically you got in the cockpit and flew the airplane as hard as you possibly could ?

**Joe Foss :** Yeah. On a scramble, you need to go right to full climb . . to gain an altitude advantage. And if you didn't get up there . . they were definitely going to sweep down and kill you.

But day after day . . we went at it . . although

they usually had significant high altitude advantage. The only thing that saved us were the ' coast watching' wireless radio operators giving us notice . . . that the Japanese aircraft were heading down.

Worked good !

**Joe Foss:** It's a terrific story. They were the ' radar ' line of watchers beginning way up at Bougainville, where the Japanese ' bled through ' what we called the gut, between the Solomon Islands. And these coast watchers would count how many were coming down. And later . . . count how many Japanese aircraft ' made it back ' home.

So when the planes we fired at were smoking - we couldn't follow them down ' til they crashed. That meant that sucker was out of action. And we'd get busy chasing the next one. So the coast watchers helped us keep count.

You didn't often have to look for targets during a dog fight. Usually the Japanese had us outnumbered six to one . . . or at least four to one. On the other hand, they seemed hesitant to be the aggressor . . . maybe because we'd had very good luck in shooting



them down.

If you read this Sakai's book, you'll find that most of the Japanese Aces were killed at Guadalcanal. He almost ended his . . . also. He made a mistake and flew up the kazoo on the dive bomber SBD . . . unaware its rear gunner was a well-fed old Iowa farm kid who'd hunted food for the table . . . 'plastered him right in the puss.'

That's why Saburo was blind in his right eye. Bullet went in his eye, then skimmed around inside his helmet. You look at the man's souvenir helmet . . . you wonder how that guy ever lived. The bullet hit his heavy goggle . . . to deflect that little .30 caliber deer rifle sized bullet . otherwise it would have ended Saburo's career dance.

**Interviewer** : What about fear ?

**Joe Foss** : In combat if you were NOT scared . . . you didn't have a brain . . . we knew it was a matter of life or death.

When someone's shooting at you . . . hey man . . . if you don't get a thrill out of that . . . you gotta be some kind of ' dead.'

Actually, the only time that you get over being scared was when you're in the actual combat. It's like . . . if you've ever competed in sports. Once you get into the game, you concentrate on the game. You try to size up the enemy. . . thinking . . . just who is that other guy ? And what does he have in his personal bag of cute tricks ?

And that's the same way in an air combat dog fight . . . particularly because some of those Japanese fighter pilots had huge experience.

" You see those airplanes up there ? [ Foss exaggeratingly plays nervous ] "Oh my . . . do you think we just about ready to engage ?

But once we got into a dog fight . . . at least I for one . . . was not shivering and shaking. I was intensely concentrating on getting that ' sucker.' And also trying to instantly avoid . . . slamming . . . into anyone else.

How is it we never had a lot of mid-air collisions ? I don't know. You're senses and intuition are going all the way . . . But so are your enemy's . . . and you're hugely concentrating. That's the way it is.

Combat on the ground is the same way. I've visited with a lot of the hand-to-hand combat people. And they respond the same way. Once you get into it, it's just like you're going to wrestle somebody, box them, fight them. You want to win . . . but you want to kill that sucker . . . wound him . . . so he isn't going to kill YOU.

**Interviewer :** How did you motivate your men to feel that way ?

**Joe Foss :** They gave their lives as simply as you go out and purchase something of value. They loved and they were protecting this country . . . and its freedoms . . . that the opposition was planning to snatch away.

**Interviewer :** I think it's hard for people to understand that you and others on Guadalcanal were willing to give up their lives.

**Joe Foss:** Absolutely true my friend.



**Interviewer :** There's a story that you tell about Roger Haberman getting wounded in combat, shipped back to the rear, and then showing up again on your doorstep. He actually going AWOL - to get back. Why do you think he did that ?

**Joe Foss:** Because . . he felt he needed needed to contribute their share. My CO, ' Duke ' Davis flew the same afternoon after being shot in the side of the

face . . and right arm . . and right leg.

After the flight surgeon dug out the shrapnel .  
. halted leaking blood with stitches . . the swelling  
immed-ately began. But Duke ignored it all. His crew  
chiefs hoisted him back into his refueled plane and he  
zoomed  
right back up into air combat.

That SAME AFTERNOON !

**Interviewer :** So why didn't ' Duke ' just say :  
" I'm going to take off for a day or so . . and heal up  
a little bit . . "

**Joe Foss :** We had a strong belief : "  
I'm personal contributing to this . . and don't want to  
let the rest of my guys down. Come hell and high water  
. . I'm going to go back up there . . right . . damn  
now !

It's hard for some people to understand that .  
. degree of dedication to their country . .  
and that degree of loyalty.

**Interviewer :** " What was the difference between

what you learned in fighter pilot training and what you really learned when you got into combat ?

**Joe Foss :** The training really prepared us for combat. But we didn't get much training . . compared to today.

**Interviewer :** Pick it up through scuttlebutt ? How were you able to leverage what you learned, in the actual dog fight ?

**Joe Foss :** Well, that first fighter squadron of ours. The pilots averaged just 213 hours total time. Most of the pilots had never flown the Grumman Wildcat. And while waiting to go to air combat . . we only had two Wildcats . . a couple of ancient Brewster Buffalo . . that were really obsolete . . just flying targets.

When we got on the ship and sailed for the Far East . . we just read manuals . . and heard a little bit about what dog fighting was all about . . But we heard it from guys like Marion Carl and Jim Flatley.

So later, when we got within 300-some miles of Guadalcanal, we catapulted off a carrier and headed for the Guadalcanal combat strip. Enemy subs were focusing on sinking us, and we didn't want to lose

all our fighter aircraft planes . . in one unlucky swoop of bad luck

I was the last guy off. And the plane just ahead of me was flown by a Lieutenant Simpson. The catapult hook broke. So he went .. putt . . putt . . putt . . fell off the bow of the carrier . . hit the water. And that became one of the famous pictures taken during the war.

There's a camera crew in the carrier's bow. Every plane that takes off . . they photograph it. When Simpson hit the water. . it looks like he was instantly running along the leading edge of the fighter's sinking wing. That picture was later enlarged so it was about seven, eight feet tall . . and I saw it on the walls of a couple of officer's club . . where they showed a lone pilot running along a fighter's wing . . as it floated in the water

Man . . did he . . get clear of that cockpit . . fast.

For good reason, because that carrier was right behind him. And if that carrier gets close it sucks you down in the screws and chews you up so there's nothing left. But a destroyer was right behind him and plucked him out . . and just that quick [ snaps his fingers.

Then the next sensation . . . was seeing the untouched bomb holes and artillery marks . . . all around Guadalcanal.

**Interviewer :** Were you expecting a fully-formed air base unit ?

**Joe Foss :** I knew it would just be a hole in the jungle. I wasn't expecting anything.

We got shot at by our own people, they were a little nervous [ at our ] coming in on them . . . But they missed. And then the people on the ground gave us a great reception. Boy they were excited and yelling . . . glad to see us.

John Smith met us. He was one of the top aces . . . 16 or 19 airplanes to his credit. And so I said to him :  
" Are you ' old ' veterans going to show us around ?  
" He just says :

. . . " TOMORROW . . . YOU WILL BE A VETERAN ! "

**Interviewer :** Chilling thought . . . On the other hand, what would you later tell a new pilot ?



**Joe Foss** : My advice to them was . . . there's lots of driving around lots of water. Just stay alert. Or this is going to be . . . your last place.

But to tell somebody about how a ' dog fight ' feels.' There are no words. You've got to actually got to witness . . . and be ' in middle of it ' . . . yourself. "

You do things in aerial combat that destroy your own airplane. Because you can't think about . . . how this is ' move ' going to effect my airplane. You had to focus on the stuff you needed to do . . . like when somebody's after you.

Or you're going after them.

You definitely ' put out ' 100% ! That's the only way I can even . . . get close . . . to describing it.

I had a terrific wingman : Boot Furlow.

Boot, he had to anticipate what I was going to do. That's the toughest job, to be a wingman. You've got to watch what your leader is doing. But of course we were madly ' scissoring ' in a maneuver that was invented by Jimmy Thach and Jimmy Flatley . . . the

Thach/Flatley Weave.

**Interviewer :** Do you remember anything about your air combat formation . . Weave ?

**Joe Foss :** On the carrier going over it was explained . . but they were just men of few words . . short and to the point. But later, we got so good at the ' Weave ' . . we did it . . in and out of fair weather clouds.

**Interviewer :** You mentioned in your book that people didn't talk about getting killed.

To tell you the truth . . I never felt like . . hey . . this is the end.

I do remember . . one time I got shot down . . with guys yelling over the radio : " Bail out ! Bail out ! " I didn't know my airplane was smoking badly . . although I had just been struck by a bullet in the engine's oil cooler.

And so on the ground Colonel Joe Renner was looking up, and shouted over the radio : " Whoever that is . . bail out ! " He thought it was from a big gasoline fire . . see . . and the airplane was going

to blow up.

Then when I started bailing out . . I looked up and here Japanese Zero ' peeling off ' . . and coming right at me. I had already unhooked my radio wires and safety belt. But I hooked up again and got my safety belt back on real quick . . I can guarantee you.

So that guy raked me with his machine guns .  
. BRRRR . . it really rattled it. Then a second Zero pulled lead on me. And I shouted to my flight mates :  
" **GREG ! . . RUDY !** " [ Greg Loesch and Rudy Radel.]

These two Zeroes never noticed their attackers. Both of them pulled away . . to get ready to hit me again, figuring . . we really . . got this old ' duck.'

And Greg and Rudy came by and . . WHACK .. WHACK . . got those two guys . . knocked them off in a hurry. So, I coasted down and ' dead stick landed it on the airfield.

**Interviewer :** So all you had to say to your men was Greg ! Rudy !" . . and they knew exactly what to do next ?

**Joe Foss :** Don't know . . But at least

they recognized my [ upper range urgent voice . . knew it was me in big trouble.]

**Interviewer :** Were you actually ' giving away Zekes shots ' away to your wingmen ?

**Joe Foss :** No, but I was chasing one guy . . battling away . . with enemies in any direction we went. I think there were 20 to 24 Zeroes in the area. And only eight of us. And my wingman was a ' green ' new guy.

The enemy often had the altitude advantage. If I had been running that particular show for the Japanese . . we'd of shot very one of us down. But the Japanese planning guys really screwed up. So it ended up - that



we knocked down almost half of them.

**Interviewer :** How did you feel about the Japanese pilots you fought against ? What did you think of their tactics and their fighter pilot skills ?

**Joe Foss :** I thought they were pretty good. But you know, they had enough power and speed advantage to

do slow rolls and climb straight up . . . that kind of cocky stuff. Naturally, it really ' roiled me up that they would do that in my face. I'd say they were pretty much a cocky group.

But, the only opponent I ever met at the time was when two pilots bailed out overhead Guadalcanal at the same instant. How they got out is a miracle . . . because of their low altitude . . . and the two bodies falling . . . with parachutes starting to open as they disappeared behind some palm trees.

And so then we jumped in the jeep, and tore down there. A Higgins boat going out to pick them up. The pilot closest to shore waved the Higgins boat off. They recognized it was the enemy pilot and they thought that he's being a great sport. So, they turned and picked our guy Conger up first . . . telling him : " That pilot . . . you just knocked down . . . is really a friendly guy . . . waved us over to pick you up first."

So old Conger thought that was terrific. So riding on the side of the Higgins boat, he extended his hand toward the guy. The guy whipped out his pistol and stuck it right between old Conger's eyes and pulled the trigger . . .

But his pistol just went . . . ' click.'

You've got to admit that you'd get sort of a thrill out of that.

And of course Conger's fever went up a little bit. Conger hit him with a boat hook . . . and parted his hair . . . didn't kill him. So then they pulled in the Japanese pilot, Before they got him in . . . he tried to shoot himself . . . but again the water-soaked gun would not go off.

Then, of course, they got him out . . . and I was really curious to see what . . . the men we were dog fighting with. . . looked like.

He was Tony Kansaneri . . . an old-time fighter. A solid guy in his flight suit . . . in perfect shape with a waist on 26 or so, broad shoulders . . . really a fighter . . . with an old original scarf . . . like you'd have for some kind of graduation.

And of course, we didn't wear that kind of stuff. No way. We looked like farmer Jones going out to milk.

And so when he ' hocked up ' a goober . . . and spit at us, some of the guys moved like the were going to

shoot him . . and I says to the whole crew :

" Forget this foolishness here. The interrogation guy will be here in a minute."

That's the last I saw of the guy until years later, down there at the Nimitz Museum, this Japanese guy came up and said : " Is Major Conger around yet ?' I said : " No, I've heard that he won't be in until tomorrow."

So the guy went away . . this Japanese guy.

Then the next day, here comes Conger, and I said : " Hey Jack, there's a friend of yours that was asking about you . . he's that Japanese guy right over there." He looked over and said : " I don't know him."

Old Jack was sort of belligerent. And I said : " Well, he sounded like he was a good friend of yours." So I took him over and introduced him.

It turned out to be the same Japanese pilot that took his pistol and ' went click ' in old Jack's face. But later, I saw their picture in the

paper and they were doing the ' dancing bear ' lecture gig together.

Things indeed change.

**Interviewer** : So what did he think of meeting this Japanese man who tried to shoot a pistol in his face ?

**Joe Foss** : They went out and played golf . . right there in Fredericksburg, Texas.

[ abridged from vetted sources including Fighter Pilot Loop [ 19 years of often unpublished air combat stories ]

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**Joseph Jacob Foss** (April 17, 1915 – January 1, 2003) was a [United States Marine Corps major](#) and the leading [Marine fighter ace](#) in [World War II](#). He received the [Medal of Honor](#) in recognition of his role in air combat during the [Guadalcanal Campaign](#). In postwar years, he was an [Air National Guard brigadier general](#), served as the [20th Governor of South Dakota](#) (1955–1959), [President of the National Rifle Association](#), and first commissioner of the [American Football League](#). He also was a [television broadcaster](#).