

## **YOU'RE TOO ANCIENT, JOE. YOU ARE 27 YEARS OLD.**

An Essay before the Indianapolis Literary Club

Given by Henry L. Winckler , March 17,2014

Heroics are a response to events some on a global scale. Men step forward offering spirit, life and limb in war and we who benefit read the tealeaves assessing motivation and politics. Two men, yes, sons of South Dakota, survived WWII as decorated heroes who went on to lives of civilian service on national and international stages. Their politics and motivations could not been different yet they served nation and world.

Brigadier General Joseph J. Foss, US Air Force, WWII, Legion of Honor, ace of aces in the Pacific and Lieutenant George S. McGovern, Army Air Force, Liberator Bomber pilot, Distinguished Flying Cross over western Europe served with their country with great distinction.

Senator McGovern went on to serve nation and world. Some of their stories I tell this evening.

### **Essayists Interest**

I knew both men one better than the other. South Dakota population now about 850k was then 730,000. Old timers figured if you did not know just about everyone you were not interested. Joe Foss farmed as a young man West of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. When Foss governed SD I had the run of the statehouse with an influential mentor. My uncle Robert Winckler was head engineer. Never ignore the little people. George McGovern was raised in Avon, SD, some 30 short miles from my home. Congressman McGovern recognized a high school achievement, thus my first contact. Tom Brokaw knew and admired Foss and McGovern and writes of Foss in his book, 'The Greatest Generation'. As contemporaries Brokaw and I met on the fields of forensic combat. Everyone knows everyone in South Dakota.

### **World War II Inevitable**

What was the sitz-im-lebin on the world stag? When German forces swept across the Polish border at dawn on 1 September, 1939, they ignited a conflagration involving 90 % of the worlds countries in some way over the next four years. The Treaty of Versailles, with its crippling German reparations and almost ritualized humiliation of the people mostly at the behest of French Politicians. The groundwork for strong nationalism and Adolf Hitler was laid and, if not Hitler, then someone else would have forced rearmament and the rush to war. World War II was almost inevitable. Most are aware of the hunger and privations of war especially in great Britain. The German Blitzkrieg ground across Western Europe. Britain quietly began preparing for attack with very limited means. The British Ministry of Information prepared an average wartime food ration based on the available supply. Bread was freely available, fruits and vegetables, as well if you could find them. The ration list allows: Meat 1b 3oz, Sugar 8oz, Cheese 1oz, Butter 2oz, Margarine 4oz, Lard 2oz, Candy 2oz, Preserves 2oz, Egg 1, Milk 3pts. The ration was laid on a table for Churchill's inspection. He thought it adequate for a day. A civil servant reminded him this was a WEEKS ration. Winnie was visibly shaken.

Pearl Harbor attacked by the expansionist Japanese Empire in the Pacific propelled the US into WW II.

Into the cauldren of war stepped men willing to sacrifice that others be relieved of misery, want and subjugation.

## Joseph J. Foss

In the Pacific the United States started island hopping toward Japan with the capture of Guadalcanal in the Solomons. Marine Corps Fighter Squadrons code named 'Cactus' defended the island from Henderson Field, an air strip carved from the jungle. Joseph Jacob Foss, a man of enormous courage and a great American warrior of his generation, during a few months of intensive combat in 1942 and 1943 in the South Pacific shot down 26 enemy aircraft and severely damaged another 14. No amount of training, he wrote in his autobiography, "A Proud American ", fully prepares for the almost inconceivable realities of the dogfight. The early engagements with enemy can be so bewildering and terrifying that only luck and providence brings the flier through alive. The daily hell that was life on Guadalcanal –the nerve shattering, life-or- death missions, combined with malaria and dysentery and poor food—was simply too much for some men. They broke under the strain and had to be reassigned to less rigorous duty.

### Beginnings

Joe Foss was born 4/17/1915 on a 'hardscrabbel farm East of Sioux Falls, South Dakota's largest city. As a child of eleven he saw Lindbergh fly into a near-by air strip igniting his love of flying. Pilots flying over the family farm waved to Foss who thought, 'some day I'm gonna trade these horses for an airplane. His father died in a farm accident and the boy at 17 had to drop school to work the family farm. He worked odd jobs, pumped gas, to earn money for flying lessons. Resuming his education at the University of South Dakota he formed a Civilian Pilot Training Program which he completed before he graduated with a Business degree in 1940. Upon graduation Foss enlisted in the US Marine Corps reserves as an aviation cadet. He later earned his wings at Pensacola and commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. He wanted a fighter pilot assignment but was told "You're too ancient, Joe. You're 27 years old!" After lengthy lobbying Foss trained on the F4F Wildcat fighter, made a squadron EX.O. and found himself on board the escort carrier Copahee.

### Guadalcanal

Joe and his squadron catapulted off the USS Copahee landed on Guadalcanal's Henderson field in October 1942. The Cactus Air Force had a pivotal role in the battle of Guadalcanal. Foss was an aggressive close-in fighter with uncanny gunnery skills probably honed hunting upland game in the sloughs and corn fields of his home state. Shades of Sargent York. On his first combat mission Foss downed a Japanese Mitsubishi Zero on October 13<sup>th</sup>, but his F4F Wildcat was shot up and with a dead engine plus three Zeros on his tail he landed at full speed, no flaps and a dead stick landing, little control barely missing a palm tree grove at the end of Henderson Field. He was shaken thinking, "I never should have left the farm'. They counted 200 bullet holes. Young men, 18 or 19 cheered and Joe Foss knew he was leader.

Foss's group known as Foss's Flying Circus had two sections nicknamed "Farm Boys" and "City Slickers". He and other flyers occasionally took rifles into the jungle looking for Japanese Soldiers. CO. Col. Bauer ended the practice: trained pilots were too valuable. They slept in six man tents and ate wretched powdered eggs. One fellow played a Gramophone with scratchy records. They bathed in the Lunga River. 'Washing Machine Charlie' and 'Millimeter Mike' harassed the field nightly so some pilots slept in daytime. My Uncle George Winckler on the forced Foss to leave the Pacific in late '44 In '45 he left the military French front recounted the every evening German recon flights by 'Bed Check Charlie'.

Cactus Pilots fought almost daily as Japanese fighters and bombers tried recapturing Guadalcanal. Joe Foss quickly became an ace with 5 kills. His totals accumulated rapidly as he approached 26. Heroics became commonplace. F4F Wildcats carried 500 Lb bombs for dive bombing destroyers and other war ships. Joe dived first to draw antiaircraft fire. His dives were close to vertical. The pullout skimmed the ship's deck. As the squadron followed he ordered, 'Keep it steep girls'.

Another day another dogfight. Foss' Wildcats shot down five Zeros while XO Foss dropped the sixth. Six Japanese pilots bailed and floated down to a presumed safe landing. Suddenly they released their parachutes falling to their deaths.

November 7<sup>th</sup> Foss and crew of seven F4Fs went after destroyers and a cruiser covered by six Rufe floatplane fighters, all dispatched easily. Joe flew protection but took fire smoking his engine which quite on return to Henderson. He went down off Malaita Island where his cockpit canopy locked on impact taking him under almost drowning. Finally with what seemed like super human strength he opened the canopy and deployed his Mae West. Sharks circled his life raft. Rescuers found him and delivered him to Malaita's Catholic mission. On the 9<sup>th</sup> Admiral Bull Halsey pinned the Distinguished Flying Cross on him. The next day he was back in action.

### Malaria

Jungle conditions were extreme and in December 1942, Foss contracted malaria and rehabbed in Sidney, Australia. January 1, '43. Recurring bouts of Malaria with necessary rehabilitation forced Foss to leave the Pacific in late '44 In '45 he left the military. He flew the last mission 10 days later when he and his flight faced down 60 Zeros. Foss ordered his squad above the clouds, executing a Lufbery maneuver, making the small flight resemble a decoy. Soon Cactus scrambled more fighters and the Japanese fled. This was Joe Foss' most celebrated mission and he didn't fire a shot

### Ace of Aces

Japanese attacks had slowed from the November '42 crises period. In three months of sustained combat, Foss' Flying Circus downed 72 Japanese aircraft including 26 credited to Foss. He equaled the record of 26 kills held by Americas top WW I ace, Eddie Rickenbacker. Foss became Americas first 'Ace of Aces' of WW II.

Months later Foss went to Washington to be decorated and begin "the dancing bear act" ( his words) promoting War Bonds, giving pep talks and factory tours.

### **Medal of Honor**

May 18, 1943 , Foss received the Medal of Honor from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Citation read in part, "for aerial combat achievement unsurpassed in this war". He admitted to some embarrassment but 'it was the happiest day of my life'. He was ever the self effacing farm boy of the prairie.

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### **Back Home**

On return to South Dakota Foss started an aviation service and Packard dealership. Still in the Reserves he formed the South Dakota Air National Guard where he made rank of Brigadier General. He was an advocate with the National Society for Crippled Children and Adults. He had a son with Cerebral Palsy, another child with polio.

### **Politics**

After a stint in the legislature Foss was elected as the states youngest Governor. He campaigned from the cockpit of a small plane. Joe was a moderate Republican, an icon but not a great public speaker. As Governor, Foss invited high school American Legion Boys State Governor, Tom Brokaw, to New York for joint appearance on 'Two For The Money' a TV game show featuring the WWII ace.

In 1958 he ran for US Congress but lost to Democrat George McGovern.

### **Always Involved**

The icon that was Foss was offered a movie, "The Joe Foss Story", for which he would receive \$750,000, A huge amount for the day.. The script had a love interest for Foss. He didn't want anything to do with a fictitious romance in the movie. Joe turned it down cold. John Wayen the designated star lost 1 millian.

The former Governor became the first Commissioner in 1959 of the fledgling American Football League (AFL) bringing it to respectability and a lucrative ABC TV deal worth 10.6 million for 5 years.

By mutual agreement he stepped aside and months later AFL and NFL merged and the Super Bowl was created.

A life love of outdoorsman and hunter Foss had a hunting sports TV show on ABC. In South Dakota hunting is what you did.

Foss became President of the National Rifle Association in 1988. Do we remember the famous Time magazine cover of Foss in Stetson hat with pistols on his chest. The NRA had morphed from a league of jolly gentleman of shooting sports and gun safety promotion to ultra aggressive gun rights advocates.

### 'What a Guy

Joe Foss was a force of nature. He got religion and left the cigar chomping, whiskey swilling, profanity behind. Joe knew no gray. His patriotism and principles were absolute. He loved his country. Men loved to gather around him as around a warn campfire. He gave them certainty.... A wink and nod said, 'Ain't he a pisser'.

Tom Brokaw in 'The Greatest Generation', captures some of this in words written before Foss 'death. "Foss, for all his strong feelings, isn't a bitter old man. He still roars to life shortly after dawn on the Arizona desert, ready to fly off to give a speech at a Marine base change of command-of-command somewhere or speak at a church rally.

Foss was 87 when he died in Scottsdale Arizona. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery

## **George Stanley McGovern**

George Stanley McGovern, son of a Methodist minister, born in Avon, South Dakota July 19,1922. He resided in Mitchell (home of the Corn Palace), SD, attended Dakota Wesleyan University and received a PhD (History) from Northwestern University.

### **Military Service**

George McGovern at 22 was pilot of a B-24 Liberator Bomber over Europe. In WWII he and fellow South Dakotan Joe Foss were at opposite ends of the earth both where they served and ideology.

If the measure of the man is the size and scope of the machine he commands then McGovern indeed deserves respect.

### **B-24 Liberator**

The B-24 Liberator was built like a Mack truck, except that it had an aluminum skin that could be cut with a knife. It could carry a load but had no refinements. Steering the four engine airplane was difficult and exhausting, there was not power but the pilots muscle. No windshield so the pilot had to stick his head out to see in the rain. Breathing was possible by wearing a cold clammy oxygen mask smelling of rubber and sweat—above 10,000 feet. No heat despite temperatures at 20,000 ft and higher got as low as 20 to 50 degrees below zero. Bare hand on machine guns froze to the metal. No bathrooms, to urinate there were two small relief tubes one forward and one aft. These were often clogged with frozen urine.

Defecating was, well, difficult. A receptacle lined with a waxed paper bag. A man had to be desperate to use it which meant removing layers of heavy clothing and exposure to cold. No kitchen facilities, no way to warm coffee, no food unless carried on. With no pressurization pockets of gas in the intestinal tract would balloon causing great pain. No aisle, only a eight inch wide catwalk running beside bombs and aluminum bomb bay doors which had a capacity of 100 pounds. One

slip and you were history. Seats were not padded nor could not recline in space so cramped the pilot could not stretch. Absolutely no concession was made to comfort for the pilot, copilot or the eight man crew, even though missions lasted for eight hours, sometimes ten or more.

The plane existed for one purpose for one purpose only and that was to carry 500 and 1000 Lb bombs and drop accurately over enemy targets. The B-24 had 4 engines with twin tails and nose wheel. Range was 2,850 miles. Top speed was 300 mph and cruise at 200 mph and carried a payload of 8,800 Lbs. There were more B-24s built than any other airplane ever built. It weighted 32,505 Lbs empty and 60,000Lbs with full bomb load. With a 110 ft wing span it was called a flying box car. The Army Air Force official history described it as "an ungainly-looking ship on the ground but it had a grace of its own in the air. McGovern felt the same way about his ride. McGovern had excellent depth perception and ability to work with the plane that universally was considered most difficult to fly. He distinguished himself as pilot, never lost a crew member and completed 35 missions out of Cerignola, Italy to bomb anything that had a swastika mostly over Germany.

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### **Richard Curtis Fighter Escort**

Our own WWII hero Richard Curtis P-51 pilot flew fighter escort for George McGovern's B-24 Liberator out of Italy. Imagine the pleasure, the completely fortuitous happenstance of the discovery. In interview Richard Curtis refers to McGovern as a good pilot and later a great statesman. Both men were great pilots. Both received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

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## **Senator George S. McGovern**

Throughout his career, Senator McGovern was involved in issues of agriculture, food, nutrition, and hunger. As first director of Kennedy's Food for Peace

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program in 1961, McGovern oversaw the distribution of U.S. surpluses to the needy abroad and was instrumental in creation of the United Nations -run World Food Program. As sole chair of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs from 1968 to 1977, he publicized the problem of hunger within the United States and issued the "McGovern Report", which led to a new set of nutritional guidelines for Americans. McGovern served as US Ambassador to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture, appointed the first UN Global

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Global Ambassador on World Hunger by the World Food Program, 2001. The McGovern- Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition has provided school meals for millions of children of Countries since 2000 and resulted in McGovern's being named World Food Prize co-laureate in 2008.

### Brokaw on McGovern

Tom Brokaw in his book, *The Greatest Generation*, captures the man that was George McGovern. Joe Foss lost the race for US House of Representatives to another South Dakotan with a distinguished war record, George McGovern, who had won one of the militaries most coveted awards, the Distinguished Flying Cross, as a B-24 bomber pilot in the European theatre. McGovern, a history professor, was as self-effacing as Foss was bold, but he was a much better politician, with a strong sense of his political beliefs and an ability to articulate them.

McGovern, who rarely mentioned his DFC or wartime service, went from the US House to the Senate before becoming 1972 presidential

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nominee of a badly fractured Democratic party. As he campaigned hard for his prairie populist beliefs, against the Vietnam War and for a liberal economic agenda, Richard Nixon and company portrayed him as a captive of the hippie left. McGovern was crushed in the general election, but his warnings about Vietnam and a budding scandal called Watergate proved prophetic. He was one of this country's most decent and thoughtful public servants. The DFC McGovern won for landing a crippled bomber and saving his crew is much more telling about his courage and patriotism than any whispered innuendo from the crowd that saw their president resign in disgrace.

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