Joe Foss:
fortes Fortuna adiuvat. Fortune Favors the Bold!

Believe it or not, the Latin phrase "fortes Fortuna adiuvat" (pronounced ʻfor.tis forʻtu.na ʻad.ju.vat) was once one that everybody knew and understood. It comes from the days of the Roman Empire—yes, 2,000 years ago—and it is one of those expressions that is intended to teach a lesson. You know, like "curiosity killed the cat," "two heads are better than one," or "actions speak louder than words." In this case, the lesson is that fortune—or luck—often follows when a person acts with boldness. That was certainly the case for Joe Foss, a real South Dakotan.

He was born in 1915 and spent his childhood on a small farm outside of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. When he was 12, his father, Frank Ole Foss, took him to the airfield in Renner, S.D., to see Charles Lindbergh, the most famous aviator in the world, and his plane, the Spirit of St. Louis, which Lindbergh had flown solo across the Atlantic Ocean to France. Joe was never the same. He had his head in the clouds, but in a good way. He had his sights set on the skies above.

Smithsonian Institution

Charles Lindbergh, the Spirit of St. Louis

In 1933, when Foss was in high school, his father was killed by a downed powerline. So, Joe, now the head of the family, dropped out of school to support his mother and brother. It was tough going as the Dust Bowl was in full swirl, wiping out crops and even livestock in its incessant "rain" of arid grime. The Great Depression prowled the land, but Foss stuck it out and kept his family housed, clad, and fed.

What happened next was Foss's first act of boldness. You might think it was taking over for his father but, in truth, that was more common than you might think, and sons often stepped in when their fathers passed away. No, this boldness was that Foss *went back to school*. At a time when many young people—especially boys—didn't finish school at all, he took the painful step of going back even though he was now older than all his classmates. Foss didn't let the sidelong glances or verbal ribbing of classmates bother him. He cracked the books and finished. Then he took it one step further and enrolled at the University of South Dakota. He graduated in 1939 with a business degree, but it was something he did outside the regular classroom that was out of the ordinary. He took a civilian flying course and logged more than 100 hours by commencement. This was, in itself, an act of some daring. Flying was a much more treacherous activity back then, and many people died in training from crashes and other mishaps.

But his daring paid off when he hitchhiked to Minneapolis to enlist in the Marine Corps Reserves and trained as an aviator. By the time he was fully certified as a military pilot, he was 27 years old, and considered to be too old to be a fighter pilot. Thus, he was assigned to taking photographs, an important reconnaissance job. But Foss wanted in the fight. His constant requests for transfer were finally granted, accelerated by the demands for such during World War II, with America struggling to defeat the Japanese Empire in the Pacific. Not a lot of aviators were aching for combat, especially with the feared performance of the Japanese Zero. Foss's requests for such were just one more example of his daring.

US Marine Corps

Joe Foss

He and his comrades-in-arms were soon on their way, in 1942, to Guadalcanal, a major theater of battle with Japanese defenders struggling to hold back the Americans. And it was here that an interesting event took place. Foss and his commanding officer were ordered to put up all operational aircraft to survey the skies. The two men felt the order was foolhardy and kept eight planes, including Foss's, undercover in case the Japanese attacked their airbase, which would have otherwise been left defenseless. The commander discovered their disobedience, fired both men, banned them from the air, and soon would be sending them home.

When a large fleet of Japanese planes filled the densely clouded skies soon after, Foss once again disobeyed orders, took to the skies with several other men, a tiny group compared to the well-over 100 Zeros, and convinced the Japanese to turn around. They had saved their military installation from almost certain destruction. It was here that Foss shot down his first enemy aircraft. Given the outcome, all was forgiven, and Foss's military aviation continued.

Continued and blossomed. In three months, Foss's squadron shot down 72 Japanese aircraft (they began calling it Foss's Flying Circus) with 26 of the kills assigned personally to Foss himself. He was a dead shot. An ace. In fact, he became known as the "ace-of-aces," equaling American World War I ace, Eddie Rickenbacker's record. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt awarded him the Congressional Medal of Honor, American's highest military recognition, as a result.

Joe Foss seemed to learn the lesson well that when he acted with boldness, great things, even unprecedented things, happened. Things like forming the South Dakota Air National Guard. Or becoming a brigadier general during the Korean War. Or becoming South Dakota's youngest governor in 1955. Or becoming the first Commissioner of the American Football League (AFL) in 1959, which merged with the NFL in 1970. Or serving as a television host of two popular sportsmen's shows.

Joe Foss never let fear or a desire for security stop him from doing what he had his heart set on doing. He knew that acting boldly was the best way to be fortunate in life, to accomplish wonderful things, and to take to the skies.

South Dakota State Historical Society, Press

Want to learn more?

Sometimes when you want to really understand a person and their zest for life, you can do so not just by reading about them but by seeing artwork based upon them. Take a trip, sometime, to Joe Foss field, i.e., the airport in Sioux Falls. There you will find a bronze statue of the man who grew up not far from there. It's not a miniature statue—not even a life-sized statue. No, there you will find a larger-than-life statue of air ace Joe Foss, of General Foss, of Governor Foss, a man with daring etched into the very lines of his face.