

"They just kept passing it around -- there were eight or nine or 10 of them who handled it before it was over," he said. "They had found it in my pocket at the airport, and they thought it was suspicious. It's shaped like a star, and they were looking at the metal edges of it, like it was a weapon. I asked for it back, but they kept handing it to each other and inspecting it. I was told to move to a separate area.

"I told them -- just turn it over. The engraving on the back explains everything. But they thought they must have something potentially dangerous here. "I told them exactly what it was -- I said, "That's my Congressional Medal of Honor."

The man relating that story is retired Gen. Joe Foss, 86. His experience last month in Arizona -- at the international airport in Phoenix -- may be the ultimate symbol of the out-of-kilter times we are going through. We are so afraid of terrorists in our midst that what happened to Foss is not only believable, but perhaps even inevitable: The Congressional Medal of Honor will be taken from its recipient because it looks vaguely ominous. I spoke with Foss because I wanted to hear it from him directly.

He told me that he holds no animosity about the incident -- "I'm just as interested in defeating the terrorists as anyone is, I promise you that" -- and that he is mostly sad that no one knew what the Medal of Honor was. Foss was awarded the medal by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II after shooting down 26 enemy planes as a Marine fighter pilot in solo combat in the Pacific.

He grew up in South Dakota -- after the war he would become governor of that state -- and took flying lessons as a young man, then went to war. He lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., and when he travels he is patted down in airports instead of going through the metal detectors, because of a heart pacemaker. At the airport in Phoenix, he said, he was being searched manually and he put his jacket through the X-ray machine. A couple of things caught the attention of the screeners -- rightly so. .

Foss has keychain made out of a dummy bullet, with a hole drilled through it to make it evident it is harmless; he also carries a small knife/file with the Medal of Honor Society's insignia on it. The screeners took both of them from Foss --traveling during these nervous days with items that look like bullets, or with even a small knife, will, and should, invite scrutiny. Even if you're 86. Even if you're a war hero. That's not what frustrated him. The screeners, he said, allowed him to mail the keychain and the little knife back to his home from the airport. But for 45 minutes, he estimated, he was passed from person to person, made to remove his boots and tie and belt and hat three different times, and prevented from boarding his flight (he was eventually allowed on) because the security personnel, he said, had misgivings about his Medal of Honor. (America West Airlines, in whose terminal in Phoenix the incident allegedly took place, said through a spokeswoman shortly after the misunderstanding that the airline's objective is to ensure safety and security for all passengers and employees.)

"I want you to know," Foss told me, "that I don't go around wearing my Medal of Honor, or carrying it with me. The only reason I had it with me on this flight was that I was supposed to give a speech to a class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and I thought the medal was something the cadets might be interested in

seeing." I asked him what he remembered about being presented the Congressional Medal of Honor. "I was right fresh out of combat when I was called to the White House," he said. "FDR was behind his desk, and he pinned the medal on my uniform. He said it was for actions above and beyond the call of duty. "I was nervous, being in the presence of the president. I think I may have been more nervous there than I was in combat. My wife and mother were with me -- it was quite a day. I think President Roosevelt called me 'young feller.'"

After the White House ceremony, Foss had his photograph taken with the medal -- the nation's highest military honor for valor in action -- on his uniform. That photo was the full front cover of Life magazine, the issue of June 7, 1943; the cover caption was: "Captain Foss, U.S.M.C. America's No. 1 Ace." And now, almost 60 years later, the Medal of Honor was being handed from one skeptical security screener to another in the Phoenix airport, while Foss, at 86, took his boots and belt off as ordered.

"I wasn't upset for me," he said. "I was upset for the Medal of Honor, that they just didn't know what it even was. It represents all of the guys who lost their lives -- the guys who never came back. Everyone who put their lives on the line for their country. You're supposed to know what the Medal of Honor is."