

In the Beginning...

Seventy years before Tom Wolfe wrote his book, Benny Foulois proved that he had "the right stuff."

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

WHEN Lt. Benjamin D. Foulois was introduced to the airplane in 1909, pilots were, in his words, "regarded as fit inmates for insane asylums." Of the handful of aviators in the United States and Europe, thirty-two were killed in crashes that year.

Popular opinion aside, survival in a new and alien environment demanded not madness but a cool head, iron nerves, an ability to learn quickly, and a lucky star. The five-foot-six-inch Foulois had demonstrated those qualifications many times prior to his first flight with Orville Wright at Fort Myer, Va., on July 30, 1909. He had served for five years in the Philippines, most of the time in active combat with insurgents, and was one of three officers trained to fly the Army's first crude dirigible.

The Army accepted the Wright A airplane after Benny Foulois's flight with Orville and moved its one-plane air force to College Park, Md., where the Wrights had agreed to train two officers—Lts. Frederic Humphreys and Frank Lahm—as pilots. Foulois joined that first class as the Wrights were completing their training commitment. He logged fifty-four minutes with Wilbur Wright and flew for two hours with Humphreys, who had soloed a week earlier after three hours of instruction. Then Humphreys and Lahm damaged the plane before Foulois was ready to take it up alone. The Wrights repaired the damage and returned to Dayton. Humphreys and Lahm were ordered back to their respective branches of the Army, and Foulois was directed by Chief Sig-

nal Officer James Allen to take Airplane No. 1 to Fort Sam Houston, Tex., and "teach yourself to fly."

The Wright A was not an easy bird to fly. For takeoff, it was catapulted along a single rail (it had no wheels) by a heavy weight dropped from a tower at the rear of the track as an assist to the cranky little thirty-horsepower engine. Flight controls were operated by two long levers: The left one moved the elevators, which were ahead of the pilot; the right one warped the wings (it had no ailerons) and moved the rudder by a fore or aft motion to turn left or right. In flight, the plane had a bad tendency to "buck" and stall in the slightest turbulence. In that event, the Wrights wrote Foulois, "put the nose down and stay with the airplane"—sound advice since until 1919 Army pilots didn't have parachutes. Landings on the plane's skids were generally with the engine shut down.

On March 2, 1910, Benny Foulois was set up and ready to solo. That day he made four flights adding up to just under an hour. The last landing put No. 1 in the shop until March 12, when Foulois was almost thrown out of the plane in turbulence. He solved that problem by inventing the safety belt. Next came wheels to replace the skids and thus free the takeoffs from the catapult.

In the weeks following his solo flight, the self-taught Foulois weathered three major crashes—two on

the Fort Sam drill field and one in the Rio Grande while on a reconnaissance mission. By the end of September, he had completed sixty-one hops, not always ending with No. 1 intact. These hazardous and exciting adventures were further enlivened by occasional low-altitude, pre-dawn runs over the Maneuver Division's tents and the headquarters latrine.

The "crazy aviator" was joined in April 1911 by a second airplane and three pilots who had been partially trained in Glenn Curtiss's new school at San Diego. One of them threw in the towel after a crash landing. A month later, Lt. George Kelly, for whom Kelly AFB is named, became the first Army pilot killed in a crash. The Fort Sam commander decreed that there would be no more flying from his drill field, and the Army's two-plane force was moved to College Park. Foulois, the Army's most experienced pilot, was sent to a nonflying post on the War Department staff.

Despite alarming casualty rates (in 1912, eight of fourteen Army pilots died in crashes), Foulois continued to fly whenever he could wangle permission. He was finally assigned once more to full-time flying duty and subsequently led the 1st Aero Squadron in the Army's initial tactical use of aviation during the Punitive Expedition against Mexican bandit Pancho Villa in 1916.

Benny Foulois remained an active pilot throughout a stormy career that led to his appointment as two-star Chief of the Air Corps in 1931. His many contributions to the development of military aviation during the 1930s are often overlooked. Perhaps he is destined to be remembered best as a valiant pioneer in the days when flying was a perilous venture—doubly perilous for a courageous lieutenant who mastered piloting alone, with the threat of disaster as his constant companion. ■



In 1910, self-taught Benny Foulois was a one-man air force.