

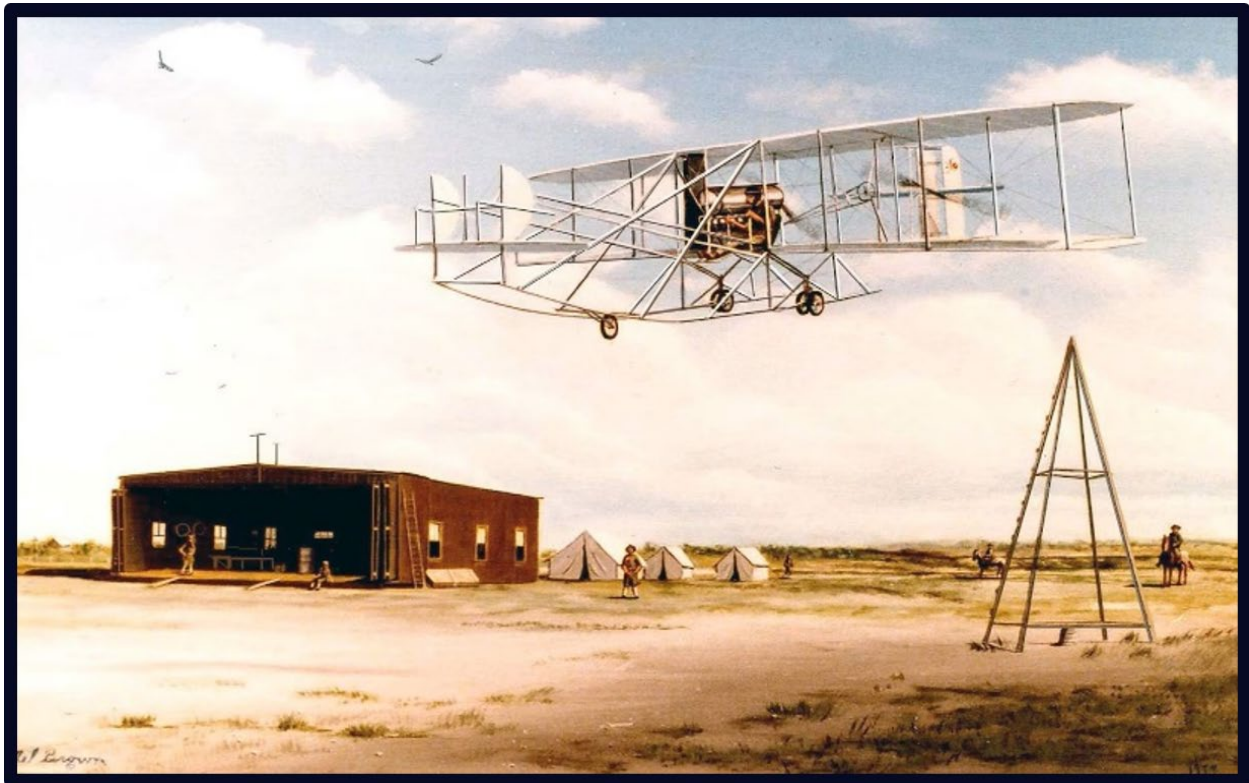
Making Aviation History Throughout JBSA

Aboard a south bound train, on the morning of February 5, 1910, the entire United States Army pilot corps arrived in San Antonio in the person of Lt. Benjamin Foulois. The 30-year-old pilot's plane U.S. Army Aero plane Number I arrived shortly afterward, unassembled, in 17 crates and an assortment of pipes, linen, wooden struts, bamboo and baling wire. Lieutenant Foulois had extensive flight training for the time: one cross-country acceptance flight of the airplane and 54 minutes of training by Wilbur and Orville Wright. America's first military flights had been made at Fort Myers, Virginia, but Foulois was being reassigned by the Signal Corps because of the more favorable flying conditions of South Texas. The Army had purchased a Wright Model 1909-A biplane nicknamed the Flyer, which had crashed on September 17, 1908, severely injuring Orville Wright and killing Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge, the first American to die in an airplane crash. However, Foulois had volunteered for dirigible training, but he quickly saw the feasibility of using airplanes in reconnaissance patrol, air-to-air combat and aerial bombing. Foulois's developing friendship with Brig. Gen. James Allen, Army Signal Corps commander and an early proponent of military aircraft, along with his contacts with the Wright brothers led General Allen to send Foulois and the plane to Fort Sam Houston, with plenty of spare parts. Continuing apprenticeship with the Wright brothers through correspondence, he trained himself.

To become airborne, the Wright Model 1909-A biplane originally had to be launched by a catapult system of steel monorail, cables and pulleys. Moving the catapult required the ground crew to turn the ramp into the wind. The craft landed on a pair of steel skids that scudded along the ground, requiring the pilot to turn off the engine before touching down so the propeller would not break and cause the fuselage to be driven into the ground. Thus, each landing was truly a crash-landing, beginning the notion that any landing a pilot could walk away from was a good one. The first public demonstration of the aircraft in San Antonio came on March 2, 1910, a day late due to catapult system difficulties. As 200 spectators watched in an early morning breeze, Foulois's plane lifted off at the eastern end of the parade ground on Fort Sam Houston, not far from the "aerodrome" of one hangar and a few tents. He soared around the field six times and landed after barely missing an approaching car. Flight time: seven and a half minutes. Altitude: 150 feet. Foulois repeated the flight three more times that day, crashing badly on the last landing. The plane was removed to its hangar for repairs. A routine had begun to launch the plane, fly it, crash-land it, repair it, write the Wright brothers for help. To make an impression on soldiers less than enthusiastic about Army airpower, Foulois buzzed their tents in a predawn "air raid." One of the least amused was his immediate superior in the Signal Corps, Major Squier, whom he had forced from the latrine. In early 1911, the field Foulois used for flight practice was edged by a row of tents occupied by Corps of Engineers staff officers there for maneuvers. On one occasion Foulois made a low, wide pass, turned and cut his engine for the landing only to discover that he was landing short. In the direct line of his falling aircraft was the row of officers' tents. Turning sharply to miss the tents, Foulois brought the airplane down directly in front of a horse and buggy. The frightened horse bolted, wrecking the buggy and slightly injuring the driver-the post's civilian newspaper distributor-as Foulois crash-landed nearby. As the plane was being returned to the hangar for the latest round of repairs, the newspaper distributor unleashed a verbal assault on Foulois. Foulois turned toward a captain watching from a nearby tent and saw it was an old friend from his days at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas-Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur sided with the young pilot.

Foulois realized long after that had he crashed into MacArthur's tent, world history could have been changed. For the flying Connecticut Yankee, these were heady times of trial and innovation. Each new challenge was a first. If the airplane was taken to a height he had never reached, that was a new record. Or if he flew longer or made better moves, they were firsts, too. Since his plane would "buck like a wild bronco" in the gusting winds of the Texas spring, Foulois sought to keep from being thrown from the craft. He visited the post's cavalry saddle shop, enlisted the aid of the leather smith and designed the first airplane safety belt from a saddle strap. Old Number 1 was returned for repairs to the Wrights' factory in Dayton, Ohio. It ended up in the Smithsonian Institution.

On May 10, Lieutenant Kelly for the first time took off in a Curtiss Jenny-4 purchased by the Army and on his landing, attempt came in steeply, bounced severely, and made a second pass. On the final approach the plane leapt 30 feet into the air and headed for a line of 11th Infantry tents. Kelly turned to avoid them, only to stall and crash. He died a few hours later from head injuries, the nation's first on-duty death of a pilot. Major Squier called for an investigation. The final report stated that Lieutenant Kelly "had made an abnormally hard landing. After the crash, General Carter prohibited further flights from the field the aircraft also startled horses-and the Provisional Aero Company disbanded. Aviation personnel and equipment were sent to College Park, Maryland, where the Army was establishing a new flight school. The pilots' commander would again be Lieutenant Beck. Because of his conflict with Beck, Foulois was sent instead to the War Department's Division of Militia Affairs in Washington DC.



Lt Benjamin Foulois and the Wright Model 1909-A biplane Fort Sam Houston Texas