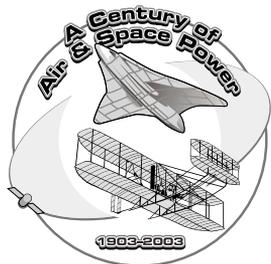


Maj Gen Benjamin D. Foulois

America's First Military Aviator

ASPJ STAFF*



Benjamin D. Foulois belonged to the first generation of US airmen who moved the Air Service from its rudimentary beginnings to full stature as an independent service. Born in Washington, Connecticut, in 1879, he enlisted as a private in the First United States Volunteer Engineers in 1898, thus beginning an



active military career that spanned nearly four decades. His early service involved him in small wars that characterized military involvement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Insurrection, the Cuban Pacification, and the Mexican Punitive Expedition.

By 1909 Foulois and two other Signal Corps officers had begun to experiment with the Wright brothers' military airplane. He taught himself to fly through trial and error and by learning as much as he could from his active dialogue with the small aviation community of the day (including the Wrights). As one of the most experienced aviators of the pre-World War I era, he suggested improvements in instrumentation, design, and support systems and set several world records in aviation.

By 1916 Foulois had planned and executed the first squadron deployment by air and the first cross-country flight. Such experience made him the logical choice to command the 1st Aero Squadron, tasked to support Gen John J. Pershing's expedition to capture Pancho Villa later that year. His duties during the Mexican Punitive Expedition brought him into contact with William "Billy" Mitchell, who, up to that point, had never flown in an airplane. Mitchell and Foulois clashed over who was to blame for the squadron's lackluster performance in Mexico, and the two remained bitter rivals for the rest of their careers.

By 1917 Foulois found himself leading planning efforts to take the fledgling Air Service to war. As a major, he submitted requirements and a \$640,000,000 budget to expand the service for the European conflict, earning him temporary promotion to the rank of brigadier general and appointment as chief of the Air Service, American Expeditionary Forces, in November of that year. Once again, however, he came into conflict with the flamboyant and po-

litically connected Mitchell, who garnered publicity and glory while Foulois served as assistant chief of the Air Service, Services of Supply. After the war, he was appointed as assistant military attaché to The Hague, Netherlands, and to Berlin. In the dramatic demobilization that followed World War I, Foulois returned to his permanent rank of major; once again, Mitchell bested him by retaining his rank of brigadier general.

After a series of important assignments in the 1920s, Foulois reported to the Office of the Chief of Air Corps in 1930 and earned the Mackay Trophy in 1931 for leading the Air Corps's annual exercises. On 19 December 1931, he became chief of the Air Corps. His vision and persistence laid the foundation for moving the Air Corps from a supporting branch of the Army toward full status as an independent service. Foulois's most important legacy during this phase of his career involved the creation of General Headquarters Air Force, precursor of the independent air service. Unfortunately, the service's poor performance in the airmail controversy of 1934 tainted Foulois's reputation and led to his retirement on 31 December 1935.

Biographer John Frisbee relates a story that illustrates Foulois's famous sense of humor: "While he was deadly serious about airpower, he was the kind of man who loved a good laugh with his friends. On one occasion he showed up for a luncheon with a note hung around his neck: 'This is General Benjamin Foulois. He requires two martinis before lunch.' It was signed by the Surgeon General." From his retirement in 1935 until his death in 1967, General Foulois remained an enthusiastic and insightful advocate of airpower.

To Learn More . . .

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Frisbee, John L. *Makers of the United States Air Force*. 1987. Reprint, Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996.

Shiner, John F. *Foulois and the U.S. Army Air Corps, 1931-1935*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1984.

*Although Lt Frederick Humphreys took lessons from the Wright brothers in 1909, thus becoming the first military pilot to solo, Foulois had a much longer career and greater influence on the evolving Air Service. For those reasons, the *ASPJ* editorial staff takes a small degree of historical liberty in characterizing Foulois as the first military aviator.