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 34, 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

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