



Historic flight recreated

More than 1,500 spectators gazed skyward recently at Fort Sam Houston to watch an antique biplane recreate the founding of US military aviation—at that time under the auspices of the Signal Corps—in San Antonio, Texas, 75 years ago.

First Lt. Benjamin Foulois of the Signal Corps, who had never before soloed in an airplane, successfully made America's first flight by a military pilot in a plane solely owned and used by the Army on March 2,

1910, around the parade grounds at Fort Sam Houston.

Retired Braniff Airlines Capt. Lea Abbott of Dallas re-enacted the historic flight as he flew his 1910 Curtiss Pusher biplane around what is now Arthur MacArthur Field.

Abbott, who was 3 years old when Foulois made his flight here, was dressed for the occasion in the open-cockpit flying attire of the period, complete with leather helmet, goggles, beige scarf, vest, flared knickers and strapped boots.

There were several differences in

that first flight and Saturday's recreation, noted the narrator, Col. Engle Scott, chapter president of the Army Aviation Association of America.

Foulois flew a Wright Flyer purchased by the Army from the famous Wright brothers, and Army Aeroplane Number 1 had skids instead of wheels until later, when Foulois modified it with wheels from a farm tractor.

The flimsy plane, which a reporter at the time described as a "collection of bamboo poles more or less attached to a gasoline engine," was launched on a 50-foot rail by ropes on a pulley system

connected to a weight on a tower.

"The weight would fall and send the plane hustling down the rail and hopefully into the air," Scott said.

While Foulois had been airborne before, and handled the controls under the direction of Wilbur Wright for 54 minutes, he had never before taken off or landed an airplane.

"His heart must have been pumping no less than Alan Shepard's (first American to rocket into space in 1961) when he made his historic flight," Scott said.

Abbott's flight wowed the crowd as he took off on the grass field, then swept low around the field at about 55 mph, seeming to graze trees, as he flew the requisite 7½ minutes and six times around.

"He must have experienced an exhilarating feeling," Scott said, but then came what the Wrights had told him was the most critical part of flying—the landing.

Abbott, who has been flying for 56 years, made it look easy as he brought the biplane in slowly and landed smoothly before the plane began bouncing from the uneven turf.

The substitute keynote speaker Brig. Gen. Rudolph Ostivich, assistant commandant of the US Army Aviation School at Fort Rucker, Ala. said Foulois made several individual "firsts" that day: The first takeoff, first solo flight, first landing and first crash, and also was the first person to learn how to fly by correspondence.

Foulois' first flight was successful, then he made three more flights that day, crashing on the fourth when the fuel line broke.

Ostivich called Foulois, who rose to become major general and commander of the Army Air Force, "a genuine American hero by daring to think differently and challenging the conventional wisdom."

—James Coburn

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