Benjamin "Benny" Delahauf Foulois was born on December 9, 1879, in Washington, Connecticut, to the son of a French veteran of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), and a Boston-born nurse. At age 18 he used his older brother's birth certificate to enlist in the Army to support the Spanish-American War, but arrived in Puerto Rico just weeks before the armistice was signed. As an engineer, he fought off the rampant tropical diseases, and after five months, was shipped home and mustered out.[1] On June 17, 1899, he enlisted again, as a private in the Regular Army and was assigned to the 19th Infantry, where he achieved the grade of first sergeant. After service in the Philippines at Luzon, Panay and Cebu, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant on July 9, 1901.[2] Foulois was transferred to the 17th Infantry, and served in Manila, Cottabato, and Mindanao. During two separate assignments in the Spring of 1902 and from 1903-1905, he participated in engagements against the Lake Lanao Moros, successfully hunting down and defeating combatant tribal leaders.[3]

Foulois attended the Infantry-Cavalry School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, from September 1905 to August 1906, and was deployed to perform military mapping in Cuba before returning to complete Signal School in July 1908 as a 1st Lieutenant. His final thesis was "The Tactical and Strategical Value of Dirigible Balloons and Aerodynamical Flying Machines," demonstrating incredible prescience in such statements as this:

"In all future warfare, we can expect to see engagements in the air between hostile aerial fleets. The struggle for supremacy in the air will undoubtedly take place while the opposing armies are maneuvering for position..."[4]

He forecast the replacement of the horse by the airplane in reconnaissance, and wireless air-to-ground communications that included the transmission of photographs. As a result, the staff of the chief signal officer selected Foulois for the aeronautical board designated to conduct the 1908 airship and airplane acceptance trials.[5] After having selected the Thomas Scott Baldwin airship as the winner of the trial, Foulois was selected as the first military crewman, and took his first flight on August 18 as engineer-pilot while Baldwin controlled the rudder at the aft end.

His first aviation assignment was to the Aeronautical Division, U.S. Signal Corps, where he operated the first dirigible balloon obtained and operated by the U.S. Government. The crash of the Wright Flyer procured at the same time by the Army on its final test flight, September 17, 1908, claimed the first US military airplane fatality, 1st Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge, and also injured Orville Wright.[6] After one year, Foulois had concluded through his experience, understanding of military dirigibles in Europe, and talks with Tom Baldwin, that there was no military future for lighter-than-air aircraft. In expressing this opinion to the Army General staff, Foulois recommended no more purchases of dirigibles, the first of many future disagreements with the military establishment.[7]

The Wright brothers spent the ten months following the fatal crash making many engineering improvements to the airplane. By July 1909, Orville was ready to complete the acceptance test for the Signal Corps. On July 30,

1909 Foulois' first flight in an Aeroplane was the evaluation test flight from Fort Myer to Alexandria, Virginia. Pilot Orville Wright and observer Foulois broke previous speed, altitude and cross-country duration records, flying at 42.5 mph, 400 feet, and for 10 miles. The Army purchased this Wright Model A, Serial No. 1, their Military Flyer, which became Signal Corps Aeroplane No. 1.[8] The final condition of the contract was to train two pilots.

Foulois hoped to take direct instruction from the Wright brothers, but instead was sent to France in September 1909 as a delegate to the International Congress of Aeronautics. While away, Lieutenant Frederck E. Humphreys made the first military solo in an airplane, on October 26, 1909. Lieutenant Frank P. Lahm followed, but on November 5, both pilots were involved in the crash of the Army's only airplane. Both pilots were reassigned to their non-flying units, and the aircraft was shipped to San Antonio, Texas.

On his return Foulois obtained less than one hour of instruction from Wilbur Wright, but did not solo. After the November 5, and a stand-down while parts were ordered, it was decided to seek a warmer training climate. Foulois was directed to report to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas and from there he was directed by the Army chief signal officer, Brig. Gen. James Allen, to "teach yourself to fly."[9] He did so, and on March 2, 1910, made four flights which include his first solo takeoff, first solo landing, and first crash. In the next two years, Foulois made modifications and demonstrated the use of the Wright B aircraft for aerial mapping, photography, reconnaissance and the use of the radio while airborne. He substituted wheels in place of skids, and installed the first seat belt.[10] On March 3, 1911, Foulois and Philip O. Parmalee made the first official military reconnaissance flight, looking for Army troops between Laredo and Eagle Pass, Texas, with a ground exercise in progress.

In December 1913, Foulois was offered an assignment to act as trouble shooter for the problem-plagued Army aviation school in San Diego, California. Foulois was able to reduce the early fatality rate for pilots from 25% to nearly zero. On November 19, 1915, Foulois led the first squadron cross-country flight of six Curtiss JN3's from Post Field, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to Ft Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas, which became the new home of the 1st Aero Squadron. In 1916 Pancho Villa crossed into New Mexico and killed 17 Americans. In response, Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing was directed to pursue Villa into Mexico, and Foulois was ordered to take eight airplanes to provide reconnaissance and communication. Within eight weeks, six of the aircraft had been destroyed, and the airplane had been proven insufficient for the high altitude, severe weather and dry atmosphere.[11]

In April 1917, America entered World War I, and Foulois was rapidly promoted to temporary Brigadier General. At the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, in Washington, he finished the plans to build an air force to support the three million-man army. Foulois took the $640 million plan and draft legislation to the House Military Affairs Committee and won approval over the Army General Staff's own recommendations. Foulois would find his way to Congress many times over the next 17 years in attempts to overcome the resistance of the Army and Navy senior leadership to any change in the status quo.