

Maneuver camps heralded a new Army and the dawning of military aviation

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The 1911 Maneuver Camp at Fort Sam Houston ushered in major changes to Army organization, tested new field regulations and, though Army leadership refused to notice, announced the dawning of the importance of the aircraft to the American military mission.

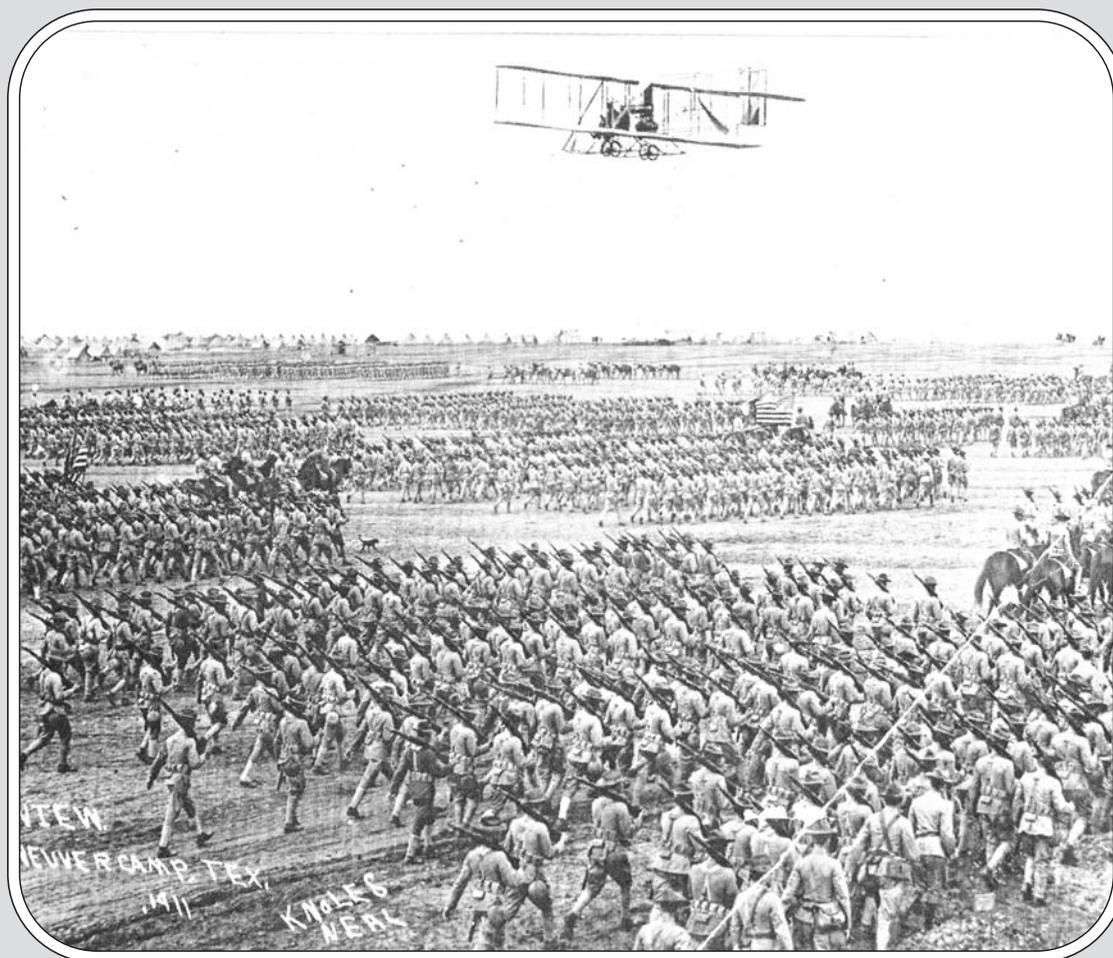
In response to political turbulence in Mexico and along its U.S. border, upwards of 20,000 troops from across the country mobilized in San Antonio in March 1911 according to reporter William A. Philpott Jr.'s "A Stake Town in Seventy Hours." Troops trained and launched maneuvers from the camp until May.

Set up in less than three days the camp was located on what was, at the time, the northeast part of the post, in an area from the Main Post Chapel, Building 2200, to the former main hospital, Building 1000, and east to Garden Street, according to the Fort Sam Houston Museum.

Early 1900s maneuver camps were aimed at transforming the loose assemblage of Army regiments, with their own traditions and cultures into a standardized force capable of mustering on short notice.

After the War with Spain in 1898, the War Department was severely criticized for poor leadership while mobilizing 200,000 troops. In order to reform Army organization, Secretary of War Elihu Root established a board to plan an Army war college in order to instruct officers on national security matters and in military strategy.

The war college concept led to the creation of the General Staff in 1903 and in 1905 the War Department published its "Field Service Regulations,



Lt. Benjamin Foulois and the Wright "B" Military Flyer aircraft pass over a troop review during the 1911 Maneuver Camp at Fort Sam Houston.

United States Army," drawing together then-current ideas on strategy and logistics.

Instructions on orders, combat, communications, intelligence, subsistence, transportation were covered under the new regulations. The Army Corps was replaced with the infantry division.

Each division was to be self sufficient and included cavalry, engineering, communications (signal corps), artillery, supplies and medical personnel. In the field, divisions handled both tactical and administrative matters.

Maneuvers under the new regulations began in 1902. Held biennially, they proved

beneficial to correct deficiencies and "give instruction and practice which our Army has not seen since the Civil War," according to the War Department Annual Reports, 1911.

The report also recommended experimenting with "motor" trucks and "motor" ambulances to test field suitability, but did not mention Lt. Benjamin Foulois' successful trials with his heavier-than-air machine.

In order to overcome the general lack of interest within the Army about the airplane, Foulois flew "over the tents occupied by sleeping officers of the division headquarters staff at about ten feet" and execut-

ed "a power dive over the headquarters latrine," wrote J.F. Shiner in "Foulois and the U.S. Army Air Corps 1931-1935."

Although his aerobatics did not improve the stance ground officers had toward military aviators, Foulois did receive permission to join the exercise but on the condition that he did not "interfere" with exercises.

His efforts proved fruitful. "At the 1911 Maneuver Camp, reconnaissance missions were flown, along with liaison missions and tactical resupply missions. The aviation section also developed drill regulations for the safe

handling and operation of the aircraft while on the ground," wrote FSH Museum director John Manguso in an earlier article for the News Leader.

Unfortunately during a flight on May 10, 1911, Lt. George Kelly was fatally injured in a crash of Signal Corps No. 2.

In response to the accident, the commander of the Maneuver Division prohibited any further flying from the drill grounds; effectively shutting down Foulois' operation, wrote Roger Bilstein and Jay Miller in "Aviation in Texas."

But Foulois returned to aviation duty at Fort Sam Houston commanding the 1st Aero Squadron during the campaign to arrest Pancho Villa in 1916, during which he made the first aerial reconnaissance over foreign territory into Mexico.

He was able to report to Gen. John Pershing that there no Mexican rebels within a day's march of his columns and make about 20 flights carrying mail and despatches. Foulois logged 19,000 miles during the reconnaissance and photographic missions according to George W. Goddard's "A Life-Long Adventure in Aerial Photography."

"We did a great amount of scouting over country in which cavalry and infantry could not operate, and we began and maintained the first regular aerial mail route for the United States and delivered thousands of letters to and from Pershing's troops," wrote Foulois.

The 1911 maneuver camp at Fort Sam Houston heralded the dawn of the military use of aircraft, among other innovations. Today, field exercises or "FTXs" replace maneuver camps and are an important tool to train troops, test materiel and the Army organization.

Photo courtesy FSH Museum