

1903-2003
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Flight
Commemorative Edition

BILLY MITCHELL
"STORMY PETREL OF THE AIR"

AIR
FORCE
History
and
Museums
PROGRAM

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Office of Air Force History
Washington, D.C.
2004



(Above) Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell personally led the attack on the *Ostfriesland* from his pennant-marked De Havilland DH-4. (Courtesy U.S. Air Force Museum)

(Below) The *Ostfriesland* sinking, July 21, 1921. Escaping air from the hull seemed to some observers to be the sighs of a great beast dying.



BILLY MITCHELL

“STORMY PETREL OF THE AIR”

petrel \ˈpe- trel, pɛ-ˈ [alternate of earlier *pitteral*] : any of numerous seabirds; *esp.* : one of the smaller long-wing birds that fly far from land — compare STORM PETREL.

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary.

“He was known as the ‘Stormy Petrel of the Air’—petrel, a bird in flight. He was that, and he soared with eagles . . .”

James J. Cooke, *Billy Mitchell*, p. 287.

On July 21, 1921, Brig. Gen. William “Billy” Mitchell circled high above the rough surface of the Chesapeake Bay, exultant witness to an event he had orchestrated and produced. Shortly after noon, the mortally wounded, former-German battleship *Ostfriesland* began to roll, turning completely over while air escaping from the huge hull gave sounds that some present interpreted as the sighs of a great beast dying. By one o’clock it was over, and *Ostfriesland* had slipped below the surface. It was not the sinking that was unique, however. Modern battleships had sunk before. They had been lost in storms and split their hulls on reefs and rocks. They had been hit by torpedoes, crushed by shell fire, and even sunk by mines and scuttling charges. But no battleship had ever gone to the bottom as the direct result of aerial bombs dropped from the fragile airplane, a new invention then barely eighteen years old. Disbelieving observers aboard the nearby *U.S.S. Henderson* were shocked, appalled, and dismayed as the *Ostfriesland* disappeared. Among the naval officers were some with tears in their eyes. But for the outspoken, flamboyant Billy Mitchell it was fulfillment and vindication. He had prophesied that aircraft could sink battleships; had fought for the trials that had just taken place; and had selected, organized, and trained the airmen who had accomplished their mission. Sinking the *Ostfriesland* was in many ways the summit of his military career, and Billy was not about to let anyone ignore his victory. Command pennant streaming from his aircraft, Mitchell paraded past the *Henderson* waving his wings, rubbing salt into a deep Navy wound.

* * *

William Mitchell—he had no middle name—was born on December 29, 1879, into a wealthy and prominent Wisconsin family living at the time in Nice, France. Prior to the Civil War, his grandfather, Alexander Mitchell, had established the Marine Fire and Insurance Company—a bank despite its name—and expanded it into a respected Milwaukee business. And during the war, he built and operated the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad. Alexander Mitchell’s business acumen had made him and his family wealthy by the time the

war ended. His son, John Ledlum Mitchell, however, proved more interested in literature, languages, and travel, and would ultimately lose much of the family fortune. John enlisted in the 24th Wisconsin infantry during the Civil War and saw combat during several of the western campaigns. Following the war he traveled extensively, played a significant role in the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union veterans, and was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and later the Senate.

Billy grew up in Milwaukee, but his parents, especially his father, were often absent. Billy liked the outdoors. He hunted and fished and, especially, loved horses and horsemanship, an affection he would never lose. He was popular and charming, and as a youngster assimilated many of the characteristics that had made his grandfather successful, including self-confidence, drive, ambition, courage, competitiveness, and a certain ruthlessness common to nineteenth-century captains of industry. Though intelligent, Billy was not particularly studious. He received private tutoring at home and spent several years at Racine College of Wisconsin, an Episcopalian preparatory school. Tired of the strict discipline at Racine, however, he transferred in 1895 to Columbian Preparatory, later George Washington University, in Washington, D.C., where his parents resided while his father was in the Senate.

In April 1898, the United States declared war on Spain. Adventure called and eighteen-year-old Mitchell promptly abandoned his studies and enlisted as a private in the 1st Wisconsin infantry. It took Senator Mitchell a few days to catch up with his son, but within three weeks his influence was felt and the Army commissioned Mitchell as a second lieutenant in a volunteer signal company. Such influence would prove important to Billy, who actively cultivated individuals like Senator William Jennings Bryan, then serving with the volunteers, and Maj. Gen. Adolphus Greely, the Chief Signal Officer. Mitchell demonstrated considerable flair for soldiering from the first. He displayed energy and initiative and enjoyed the opportunity to lead small units. He suffered discomfort and hardship without complaint, and his skill with horses and guns impressed professional soldiers. Unfortunately for Billy, however, Spain sued for peace before his unit could get out of Florida. Mitchell then used his father's leverage to join the occupation force in Cuba, which he reached in December 1898. He spent much of the next few months stringing miles of telegraph wire throughout Santiago Province. Mitchell liked the work, enjoyed the life, and began consider the military as a career. As an accomplished horseman, he preferred the cavalry, but the Signal Corps offered him the higher rank of first lieutenant. Despite opposition from his parents—as members of the upper class, they regarded the military as beneath their son—Mitchell accepted the Signal Corps offer.

It proved a wise choice by Mitchell and a good one for by the U.S. Army; Mitchell proved himself an excellent officer. His first assignment, to the Philippines in October 1899, coincided with the beginning of a two-year campaign against Emilio Aguinaldo. Mitchell earned considerable distinction and warm praise during the campaign, reinforcing his personal belief that he could succeed in the military. On the other hand, recognition that his element was ser-

vice in the field with troops, not stagnation in a peacetime garrison, made him cautious about committing to a career. Billy's next assignments made all the difference. In the summer of 1901, General Greeley ordered him to Alaska to survey routes for a communications system across the territory. Mitchell spent two years leading small teams that erected over 500 miles of telegraph lines. The work in heavy snow and arctic conditions was brutal, but Mitchell thrived. This experience with individual responsibility and his unqualified success was critical. First, he gained tremendous confidence in his ability to accomplish major projects, a confidence reinforced by his belief in the natural superiority of his class. Second, and perhaps more important, instead of regimental duty under close supervision and the necessity of working in harness with other officers of equal rank—the rough-and-tumble “school of the soldier”—Mitchell's experience was largely that of an independent commander operating on his own with little supervision.

In November 1903, General Greeley sent newly promoted Captain Mitchell to the intellectual center of the army, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, where Billy came into contact with military aviation for the first time. Lighter-than-air craft, balloons and dirigibles, were a new technology with which Signal Corps officers had to be familiar. In 1906, Mitchell published a paper on “The Signal Corps with Divisional Cavalry and Notes on Wireless Telegraphy, Searchlights and Military Ballooning.” Mostly, this was a standard description of Signal Corps activities and equipment, but the inclusion of ballooning was significant. Young Signal Corps officers of the time had to study these new technologies, and the military potential of balloons and dirigibles in reconnaissance, transportation, and even strategic operations was just emerging. In his paper, Mitchell concluded that “conflicts, no doubt, will be carried on in the future in the air, on the surface of the earth and water, and under the earth and water.” These words were the first expression of ideas he would later apply to heavier-than-air craft.

Subsequently, Mitchell attended the School of the Line in 1907 and was one of twenty “distinguished graduates” of the Army Staff College in 1909. He returned to the Philippines, where he spent two more years and carried out an undercover reconnaissance of the islands between that territory and the Japanese-controlled Formosa, to the north. He also toured the battlefields of the Russo-Japanese War and studied the Chinese, Russian, and Japanese armies, reporting what he learned to the U.S. Army War College after his return home. His central message, not unique to him, was that war with Japan was inevitable and that, consequently, the Philippines were in great danger.

In March 1912, Mitchell was one of twenty-one officers selected to serve on the General Staff of the U.S. Army. The General Staff was comparatively new; one of the reforms implemented by Secretary of War Elihu Root following the Army's miserable performance during the Spanish-American War. Appointment to it was a signal honor, especially, for Billy because he was selected for merit, not through influence. By the time he reported to Washington, D.C., in February 1913, Mitchell had established a reputation as a brilliant, dynamic, articulate, and charismatic officer. A handsome patrician, he had married into a socially

prominent family, played expert polo, entertained lavishly, and was equally at home with soldiers in the field and elites in high society. Along with his engaging personality, came a zeal for distinction, preference for combat service, and an honest desire to serve his country. The Army had added to these a worldwide view, trained him to think in terms of mass warfare, hardened him in guerrilla combat, and taught him an appreciation for rapid technical advances.

* * *

While serving on the General Staff in Washington, D.C., Billy Mitchell finally became fully aware of the airplane. In 1913, Army aviation came under the Signal Corps, and as the only Signal Corps officer assigned to the General Staff it was inevitable that he would brush elbows with the subject. The first encounter came quickly. In 1913, flyers in the Aeronautical Division convinced some members of Congress that better progress in military aviation could be made if aviation was independent of the Signal Corps. In August, Mitchell testified against the proposed legislation before the House Military Affairs Committee. The offensive ability of the airplane had yet to be proven, he told committee members. The airplane was effective in its role of observation and thus must remain as an integral part of the Signal Corps communication system.

Although Mitchell's comments showed a lack of personal interest in the subject at the time, he did have professional curiosity. He had met one of the Army's earliest pilots, Lt. Henry H. Arnold, whom he had pumped for information, and the two became close friends. But aviation was not for him. As he told Congress, flying was a young man's game, and no one married or older than thirty should be an airman. Mitchell was both. The subject that really fascinated him, and most officers of the General Staff, was the outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914. Mitchell quickly sought assignment to Europe as an observer. Historians have written that President Woodrow Wilson's opposition to American participation in an European War kept Billy in Washington, but in fact, Signal Corps Maj. George O. Squier, military attaché in London for the first two years of the war, showed considerable interest in the progress of aviation, observed developments in France and Britain as closely as possible, and forwarded frequent reports to the War Department. No need existed for an additional observer. Mitchell read Squier's reports, though he continued to show limited interest in aviation.

During 1915, however, in response to one of President Wilson's requests for proposals on preparedness, the War Department produced one of the earliest comprehensive statements on U.S. military aviation. The unsigned report, an excellent statement on aviation thought at the time, identified Army support as the primary role of military aviation under the Signal Corps. Aviation was a "particularly valuable adjunct to the Army" and a second line of defense of the nation if the first line of defense, the U.S. Navy, failed. Airplanes should be attached to harbor and coastal defenses for use in observation and to prevent enemy reconnaissance. They could enhance the accuracy of coastal artillery, destroy enemy aircraft, and attack the enemy's smaller surface forces. As noted, this was an unsigned report, but at least one of Mitchell's biographers has concluded that he was the author.

In 1916, Mitchell took a more direct role in aviation when serious problems erupted at the Signal Corps Aviation School in San Diego between Army aviators and their non-flying superiors. During the ensuing uproar, on May 5, 1916, the War Department relieved the head of the Aviation Section in Washington, Col. Samuel Reber. Newly-promoted Major Mitchell became temporary head of the Aviation Section pending the arrival of Colonel Squier from England to replace Reber. Subsequently, in June 1916, Mitchell became Squier's permanent assistant in the Aviation Section. Billy responded by becoming a serious student of military aviation, beginning by learning to fly at his own expense. In the fall of 1916, he began instruction at the Glenn Curtiss Aviation School in Newport News, Virginia. The price was hefty. Fifteen hours instruction and thirty-six flights taught him the rudiments of piloting at a cost of \$1,470. Mitchell tended to be erratic, flying well one day and less competently on others, and civilian instruction did not entitle him to wear the Junior Military Aviator badge of an Army pilot. Only in France in September 1917, after considerable informal instruction from French pilots, did he finally earn the rating. But there was one immediate reward for his effort to learn to fly. In January 1917, the War Department decided to send another aviation observer to Europe; Squier nominated Mitchell, whose staff experience and flying training made him a logical candidate. Billy Mitchell was off to war.

* * *

Mitchell left for France on March 19, 1917, at a time when German-American relations were deteriorating rapidly under the pressure of a renewed U-boat assault on neutral shipping and publication of the Zimmerman telegram, in which Germany promised Mexico restoration of much of the American Southwest if it would fight on Germany's side. He was on his way to Paris on April 2, 1917, when President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war, and reached that city on April 10. As a scion of wealth and political power, Mitchell—who spoke fluent French—fit well in French political and social life, and, as a representative of the General Staff, he was a dynamic symbol of the New World coming to the aid of the Old. He quickly seized the opportunity, establishing an American aviation office in Paris, touring the front lines, and hobnobbing with high-level Allied leaders. And he flooded the War Department with recommendations, most of which were ignored by a staff overwhelmed by the demands of a world war it was ill prepared to manage.

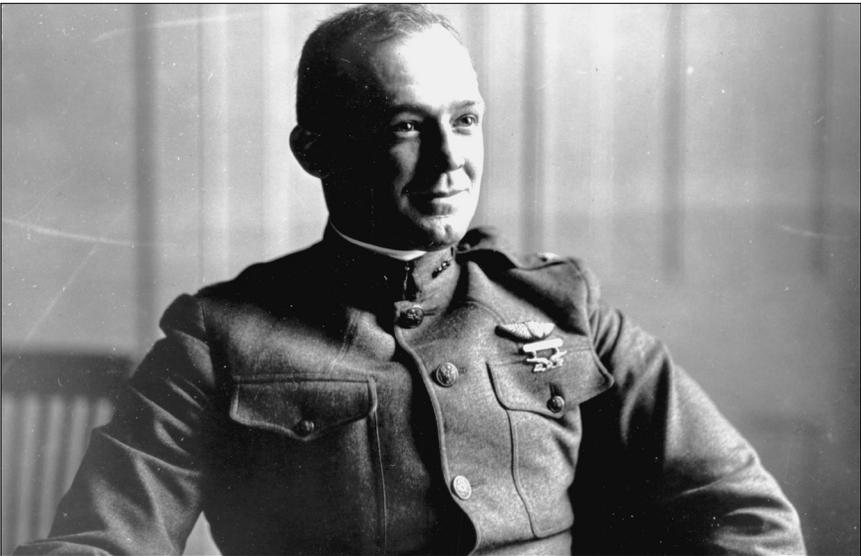
The French facilitated Mitchell at every turn, providing him with an airplane and pilot and unprecedented access to every part of the front. Despite his personal feelings for the French, however, Mitchell quickly found the British approach to the airplane more to his taste. For one thing, the French Nivelle offensive in April 1917, witnessed by Mitchell, was a catastrophic disaster that led to the near collapse of the French army. Prior to the offensive, the French had concentrated their pursuit and bombers in a unified *aviation de combat* under army group command for increased flexibility and enabling it to mass against targets. In the aftermath of the attack, the *aviation de combat* was broken up and the aircraft parceled out to lower echelon units spreading them across the front.

In contrast, Mitchell visited the British army in May where, despite serious losses, the emphasis was on the spirit of the offensive. In almost every way, he judged British attitude and methods superior to the French.

Above all, the French had no one of the stature and presence of Maj. Gen. Hugh Trenchard. It is important to note that Mitchell was not an original thinker. His talent lay in identifying and publicizing ideas and concepts. "Boom" Trenchard, likewise a practical leader rather than theorist, had seen that the airplane was inherently an offensive weapon and imbued the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) with that spirit despite terrible losses. The offensive was his trademark. Later, in November 1917, he advocated long distance bombing as one of the RFC's missions, and he repeated his call for a strategic bombing campaign in June 1918 after creation of the Royal Air Force (RAF) as an independent force in April of that year. But Trenchard was also intensely practical. He never lost his awareness of British industry's difficulty in keeping up with demands on the Western Front and refused to deprive combat units of aircraft by concentrating construction on one type of machine. Further, early in the war he perceived that ground forces were paramount, and he refused to advocate air operations separate from the British Expeditionary Force. Finally, he recognized the limitations on bombers in range, payload, and numbers that made a real strategic campaign impossible at the time. Trenchard and Mitchell hit it off during their first meeting, and it is impossible to underestimate his influence on Billy.

In July 1917, Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing and the nucleus of which would become the large, complex headquarters staff of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) reached France. Pershing's air officer was Maj. Townsend Dodd, an experienced veteran of the 1st Aero Squadron and Pershing's Punitive Expedition in Mexico in 1916. After its arrival in France, AEF headquarters absorbed Mitchell's small air office, and on June 30 Mitchell, since he outranked Dodd, became the chief air officer for what would become the Air Service, AEF. It is also interesting and important to note that during the Punitive Expedition, Pershing had separated his aviation unit, the 1st Aero Squadron, from its parent organization, the Signal Corps, and had it report directly to his headquarters. He now made the decision to do the same within the AEF in France, a significant change. The Air Service, AEF became a service independent of the Signal Corps in France many months before it achieved the same status in the United States.

During World War I, Pershing was assigned one of the most difficult jobs attempted by any American military leader during the Twentieth Century; the creation of a huge U.S. Army in a distant country while short of almost every resource required and heavily dependent upon the principle Allied nations, France and England, who had their own plans to "amalgamate" the fresh American troops into their own armies. Pershing was committed to creating an independent U.S. Army, and one of his greatest difficulties was establishing a modern organization and identifying, selecting, and training the thousands of officers required to lead his force in combat. Pershing was thus immersed in the complex, almost impossible process of evaluating and passing judgment on lit-



(Top) Mitchell in France, in the front seat of his French-built Spad XVI. He often flew over the Front, setting the example for future U.S. air leaders who frequently flew combat missions.

(Above) Mitchell's protégé and friend, Col. Henry H. Arnold, the highest-ranking flying officer in Washington, D.C., during World War I and future commander of the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II.

erally every officer arriving in France, winnowing out those who could not perform and trying to find the best position for those who could. It remains unclear exactly where Mitchell stood in Pershing's estimation during the summer and fall of 1917. It appears likely that Pershing saw him as distinctly promising, but that he was also aware of Billy's tendency to act independently, outside the AEF staff.



Lt. Col. Raynal C. Bolling commanded the 1st Reserve Aero Squadron at Mineola, New York, in 1916. In mid-June 1917, he led the Bolling Mission to France to examine the state of aviation and make recommendations on the direction the U.S. aviation program should take

Billy's ability as a combat leader and willingness to work within a combat staff remained unproven. In the long run, however, Pershing's observations meant that, except for the short period in July and August 1917, Mitchell would never command the Air Service, either in France or in the United States.

The command situation was complicated at the end of June by the arrival of Lt. Col. Raynal Bolling and a team of air officers sent to Europe by the War Department to determine what equipment and aircraft the U.S. could purchase and what it needed to manufacture. Bolling was no professional soldier. In civilian life, he was chief attorney for the U.S. Steel Corporation. He had learned to fly in 1915 as a member of the New York National Guard and had commanded its 1st Aero Company in 1916. Following completion of the Bolling Commission's mission, Pershing retained most of the men including Bolling. To make room, Mitchell was placed in command of all aviation activities in the Zone of Advance and Bolling of all activities in the Zone of the Interior. This



Artilleryman Col. William L. Kenly, was selected to command the Air Service, AEF in August 1917. He is shown here in 1918 as a major general and commander of the Air Service in Washington, D.C.

arrangement ended unity of command in the Air Service; decisions thus had to be made and disagreements—and there were many—resolved by the AEF's chief of staff. On September 3, Pershing moved to resolve this clumsy, unresponsive arrangement, by designating Col. William L. Kenly, commander of the 7th Field Artillery, as the chief aviation officer for the AEF. Kenly had organizational skills, but was no airman. He had taken a short familiarization course on military aviation for field-grade officers taught at the Signal Corps Aviation School in San Diego prior to the war, but had little real knowledge of how to lead an air service.

The more experienced and aggressive Mitchell thus played a dominant role in the development of the AEF's aviation program, even after Kenly took charge. As the second ranking member of the Aviation Board and the U.S. air officer with the most experience in Europe, he took a major part in selecting locations for facilities and schools, solving questions of maintenance and supply, designing and laying out a training program, and preparing the plans that would place tactical air units in combat. Based upon advice from the Board—primarily meaning Mitchell—Pershing began negotiating for the purchase of combat aircraft in Europe and for construction of aviation facilities in France. Mitchell took part in the selection of an area at Issoudun, which would become a huge flying training complex, a site for the major air depot in the Zone of Advance at



Experienced and energetic, Mitchell exercised considerable responsibility for the Air Service under Kenly, helping select sites for critical facilities such as this huge flying training center, the 3d Air Instructional Center at Issoudun.

Colombey-le-Belles, and a location for an advanced aerodrome at Amanty. Operationally, the first U.S. aviation unit—fittingly, the venerable 1st Aero Squadron—reached France in early September, *sans* aircraft. And Mitchell began to exploring a doctrine using pursuit and observation squadrons in “mass” in combat. To this, he would add Hugh Trenchard’s emphasis on the offensive. Billy also continued to fly in his French-loaned airplane. In June 1917, he was in the air almost every day; in July he began flying alone; and in September he received his Junior Military Aviator wings, backdated to July 19. A coterie of younger officers began to form around Mitchell, impressed by Billy’s energy, imagination, combativeness, and enthusiasm. They would be “Billy’s boys” and many would have a major impact on the development of military aviation in future years.

Despite progress, it rapidly became clear that Colonel Kenly was not up to the job, and in November 1917 he was replaced. The new commander of the Air Service, AEF was Brig. Gen. Benjamin D. “Benny” Foulois, and his arrival would have a permanent and adverse impact on Billy Mitchell. Foulois was the Army’s most experienced aviator. He had commanded the U.S. Army’s first balloon detachment, learned to fly airplanes from the Wright Brothers, experimented with the Army’s first airplane in 1910, and commanded the 1st Aero Squadron during the Punitive Expedition. Since the war began, he had been in the War Department immersed in planning and coordinating the exponential growth of military aviation in the United States. Foulois was an absolute contrast to Billy Mitchell. A former enlisted man and son of a plumber, he had few if any pretensions to high society. As an airman, he was as much a mechanic as

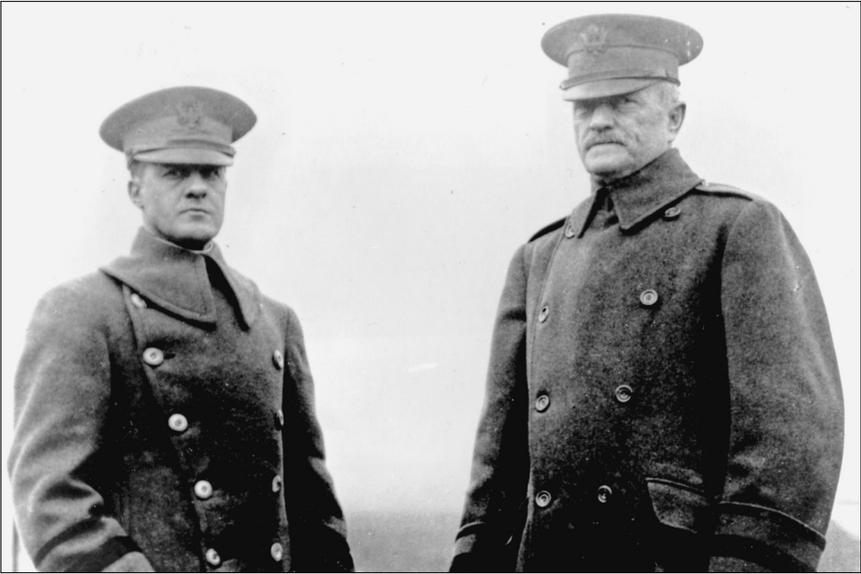


In November 1917, Brig. Gen. Benjamin D. “Benny” Foulois, shown here at Issoudun with Secretary of War Newton Baker, took command of the Air Service, AEF. Foulois and Mitchell were bitter rivals.

pilot. He preferred whiskey to cocktails and poker to polo, and paled in presence beside the colorful, immaculately-dressed Mitchell. When it came down to it, the two men shared only two characteristics. Both had a firm, deeply-held belief in the future of independent airpower and both were unrelentingly ambitious.

On November 12, 1917, General Foulois and a staff of more than 100 newly-commissioned civilians sprinkled with a few regular officers reached France, and on the 27th, he took command of the Air Service, AEF. Unfortunately, there was “history” here. Both he and Mitchell were Signal Corps officers and as late as 1916, “Major” Mitchell had outranked “Captain” Foulois. The two had also crossed sabers the year before when Mitchell, in Washington, had questioned Foulois’s expenditures for the 1st Aero Squadron in Mexico. Billy also felt that his own, more recent, extensive experience in Europe should count for more. Further, Mitchell believed that the War Department had sent Foulois to France to gain control of the AEF’s aviation. Finally, he resented Benny’s staff of “carpetbaggers,” as he called them, writing that many had never seen an airplane and all were totally ignorant of the Air Service in France.

Foulois held the position that Mitchell believed should have been his. Mitchell continued to prove himself a tireless, dedicated worker, but he also began complaining about Air Service headquarters. Among those irritated by these actions, were Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett, commander of I Corps, and staff officers Cols. Dennis Nolan and. Hugh Drum, favorites of Pershing who were destined for high position in the AEF during the war and in the U.S. Army afterward.



Foulois had commanded the 1st Aero Squadron during the Mexican Punitive Expedition in 1916. His assignment to the AEF reunited him with Gen. John J. Pershing who had commanded in Mexico.

Foulois quickly reorganized Air Service headquarters into eight divisions and filled most of the new positions from the ranks of those he brought with him. Mitchell became the chief of the air service for First Army. Cursing Foulois's "incompetent lot of air warriors," but happy to be in command of the front line combat units, Mitchell busied himself with operational planning. In January 1918, he began gathering the first U.S. squadrons—still without airplanes—at Amanty, where they would form the I Corps Observation Group. And soon the 94th and 95th Aero Squadrons—half of what would become the famous 1st Pursuit Group—reached the Zone of Advance.

In March 1918, the Germans launched the first of several major offensives of the year. This one broke the British Fifth Army and yielded huge advances. Assault troops, exploiting the shattered lines, killed Colonel Bolling, who was caught in the maelstrom while touring air units. Pershing had used Bolling to address problems with the acquisition of aircraft and aviation-related materials. The colonel's death thus led to growing confusion in acquisition, training, and coordination with the allies, a situation complicated by Foulois's failure to properly staff the Air Service Line of Communications. By May, Pershing had concluded that Foulois had failed to measure up to his standards. Foulois worked hard and meant well, and was a good leader. But he lacked the management and administrative experience to build the aviation program needed by the AEF on the Western Front. He proved unable to make the various aviation headquarters spread across Europe work together or coordinate the numerous activities necessary to building a combat-ready air ser-



In May 1918, Pershing appointed an engineering officer and his former classmate at West Point, Brig. Gen. Mason M. Patrick to command the Air Service, AEF in place of Foulois. Patrick knew nothing of aviation, but had tremendous organizational skills, extensive experience with large organizations, and a commanding presence.

vice. The AEF was now paying the price of the U.S. Army's prewar failure to expand its air force suitably, or develop air leaders capable of commanding huge enterprises. Pershing—who characterized his air leaders as “a lot of good men . . . running around in circles”—turned to another branch of the Army for a solution. On May 29, 1918, his former West Point classmate, now a distinguished U.S. Army Engineer, Brig. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, became chief of the Air Service. Patrick, like Kenly, was no airman, but he had tremendous organizational skills, extensive experience with large organizations, and the commanding presence that had been lacking in the Air Service, AEF.

The orders appointing Patrick, assigned Foulois to replace Mitchell as Chief of Air Service for First Army, while Mitchell stepped down to be chief of Air Service for I Corps. When Foulois arrived to take over the Air Service headquarters at First Army, Mitchell refused to give up his office furnishings and continued to criticize Air Service policies, procedures, and decisions, which certainly did his reputation no good. Among the scene's observers was another of Mitchell's rivals in the Air Service. Col. Frank P. Lahm—a pioneer airman like Foulois who was then assigned to operations at I Corps. Benny Foulois found Mitchell's actions “extremely childish and entirely unbecoming an officer of his age, rank and experience.” On June 4, he wrote Pershing, recommending that Mitchell be relieved of command and returned to the United States.

Pershing could have removed Mitchell summarily, but he faced a serious quandary. Aggressive leaders were critical to the AEF, and contentious as he was, Mitchell had proven himself fearless, audacious, and bold. Pershing was thus in the position once occupied by Abraham Lincoln, who had said of Ulysses S. Grant: "I cannot spare this man; he fights." Pershing summoned Billy to Chaumont for one of those icy personal interviews that often left officers shrunken and diminished. In the sanitized words of the AEF's chief of staff, General Pershing "talked quite plainly to Colonel Mitchell and gave him to understand that [he] in no wise approved or condoned his apparent insubordination, but that he would give him the opportunity to set himself right."

A chastened Billy Mitchell apologized to Foulois, who met him more than half way. First, Benny assigned him to his staff as operations assistant. Subsequently, as American air units moved into the Château-Thierry sector, he placed Mitchell in tactical charge of all the pursuit units designated for service in the area. Mitchell settled down to business. He was too good a fighter to be left behind and, besides, a good fight was just what he needed to get back into Pershing's good graces. But, while his performance in planning and directing Air Service combat operations in the Château-Thierry proved outstanding, he continued to invite controversy. In July, he made an enemy of Col. Malin Craig—chief of staff of I Corps and a future chief of staff of the U.S. Army thus adding to his reputation and fostering resentment among AEF officers, many of whom were destined to become leaders of the post-war Army.

On July 25, 1918, based upon Billy's performance directing Air Service combat units in the Château-Thierry area, Foulois proposed that Mitchell replace him as chief of Air Service, First Army, while he (Foulois) became assistant chief of the Air Service, operations, and later assistant chief of Air Service, Zone of Advance. Under this division of labor Foulois coordinated the assembly, training, equipping, and preparation of all Air Service units as they entered the Zone of Advance, while Mitchell gave his full energies to the combat operations of the units prepared and sent to the front by Foulois.

These changes were made just in time for U.S. First Army's attack on the St. Mihiel salient on September 12, 1918. Here, Mitchell made his greatest contribution to the war. The St. Mihiel salient was a huge bulge in the French line south of Verdun, residue of a successful German offensive in 1914, that complicated French rail traffic between Paris and the eastern portion of the front. The German-held city of Metz lay just beyond the base of the bulge as did the iron mines at Briey, adding to the position's importance. French efforts to eliminate the bulge had failed; now it was the AEF's turn. Pershing opened First U.S. Army headquarters in the area on August 13, 1918, and began to secretly concentrate fourteen infantry divisions—nine of them American—for a massive attack designed to pinch the salient off at the base. The attack was complicated by last minute French demands that would have ended it completely and divided the American army between two French armies. After lengthy argument, Pershing agreed to follow the attack on St. Mihiel with a full-scale assault in conjunction with the French in some of the most difficult terrain on the Western Front, the



(Above) The only American-built combat aircraft to see service at the Front during World War I was the British-designed De Havilland DH-4, powered by the U.S. 400 h.p. "Liberty" engine. The DH-4 served as both an observation aircraft and a day bomber during the St. Mihiel offensive. This aircraft wears the insignia of the 12th Aero Squadron, an observation unit.

(Below) Brigadier General Foulois, on the left, talks with officers at the Air Service assembly plant at Romarinton, France, where the DH-4s shipped from the U.S. were assembled and tested.





Mitchell had little to do with U.S. strategic bombardment during World War I. Air Service plans for strategic attack focused on 1919 and were embodied in the Handley-Page Project, which envisioned building components for the British-designed, twin-engine bombers in the U.S., and shipping them to England for assembly in plants established for that purpose. Ultimately, none of these saw combat. This Handley-Page O/400 was built by the Standard Aircraft Corporation of New Jersey.

Argonne forest, west of the Meuse River. It was a massive undertaking. In Pershing's words, "we had undertaken to launch with practically the same army within twenty-four days, two great attacks on battlefields 60 miles apart." The time element was critical. Normally, the French and British army staffs would devote months to preparations for a follow-on attack of the scale envisioned; Pershing's staff would have barely three weeks.

Airpower played a major role in the St. Mihiel effort. Under Billy's direct command were 1,481 combat airplanes from the U.S., France, Great Britain, and Italy, enabling him to apply in practice the theories of mass and emphasis on the offensive that he had been nursing. Mitchell had assembled the largest concentration of Allied aircraft of the war, and he wielded them according to a carefully orchestrated plan. Mitchell allocated units on the basis of where the main fighting would take place in an effort to deal a knock-out blow to the enemy from the air. First, his pursuit would sweep the German air force from the sky, thus denying enemy reconnaissance the ability to see what was taking place and enabling Allied reconnaissance to observe, photograph, and report. In the meantime, bombardment aircraft would attack airfields, railway stations, bridges, ammunition dumps, and troop concentrations beginning, before Pershing's "Doughboys" attacked and continuing throughout the advance. Once the assault began, Mitchell's pursuits would also range far to the German rear, eliminating enemy aircraft and opening the way for the bombardment squadrons.

At a final staff conference on September 10, Mitchell, according to his own account, showed his true mettle. Steady rains and the feet of hundreds of thousands of men had churned the roads into rivers of mud threatening preparations



The St. Mihiel Offensive required the deployment in secret of hundreds of thousands of men and tons of supplies. Here, Military Police direct traffic in the streets of St. Mihiel.

for the assault, and some on Pershing's staff were discouraged. Mitchell had to wait his turn to speak—he was a rather junior officer at the conference—but when he did, he expressed himself forcibly. There was no time for delay; the troops were in position and ready to go. Further, he had just flown over the enemy lines personally and had seen signs that the Germans had already begun to withdraw. He expected that they would not fight long for the salient. Pershing probably appreciated Mitchell's comments, but they were really unneeded. "Black Jack" had no intention of delaying.

On September 12, over 500,000 Doughboys and 100,000 French troops went over the top supported by 3,000 artillery pieces and 267 tanks. Initially, the attack was hampered by rain that came down in torrents, reducing everything to slow motion. Further, Mitchell was right. German intelligence had foreknowledge of what was coming, and the American offensive was aided by the German decision to withdraw the troops from their positions in the salient, thus shortening the lines and freeing reserves to serve elsewhere on the front. The Doughboys caught the Germans in the process, however, and reduced a planned orderly withdrawal to a disorganized scramble for survival. After a slow start, the assault gained speed, and First Army completed its mission on September 16, eliminating the salient and capturing 15,000 enemy troops and 257 guns at a cost of 7,000 casualties.

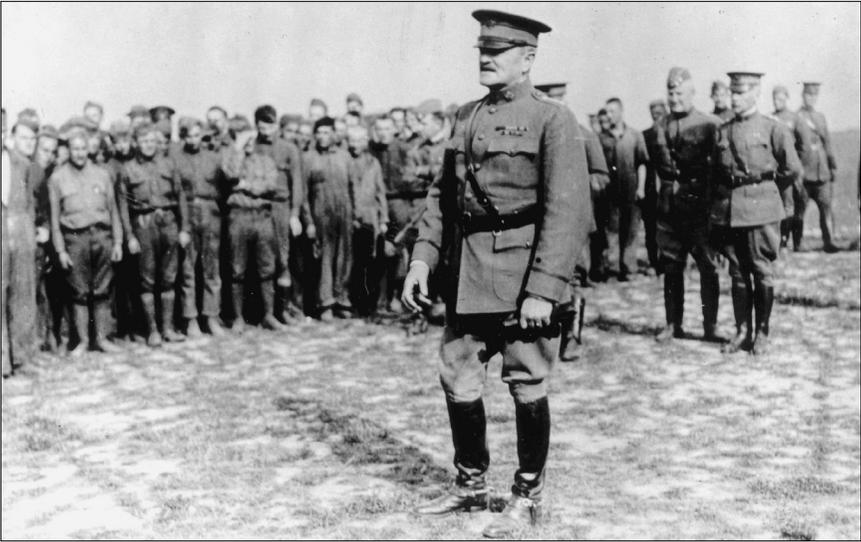
Air Service losses were also comparatively light at the beginning, and despite the weather and other difficulties, it made a major contribution to the operation.

As one historian later wrote: “All of the plans, all of the preparation, and all of the daring and courage of the airmen brought about the desired results: air superiority over the main battle area, which was, in Mitchell’s mind, one of the keys to victory . . .” Also, as he did throughout the war, Mitchell continued to fly over the front lines, sharing his men’s hardship and danger, a trait that won their respect. Losses increased as the Germans brought in experienced combat units commanded by veteran aces like Ernst Udet and Hermann Goering. Mitchell’s pursuit squadrons took serious casualties, and two bombardment units—the 11th and 96th Aero Squadrons—were essentially wiped out. The German commander, however, reported that the AEF maintained “a continuous and powerful antiaircraft defense” that no doubt hid preparations for further attacks toward Metz. He fully anticipated a large-scale attack on September 15, by which time much of the AEF had begun to transfer to the North. Pleased with the results of his air commander’s efforts, Pershing recommended Billy Mitchell for promotion to temporary brigadier general; he pinned on his star on October 13.

Despite some urging within AEF headquarters to continue the assault, seize the city of Metz, and break the German rail connections in the region, Pershing’s agreement with the French turned First Army north toward the Argonne forest. It was a staggering task for the AEF. Pershing’s best, most experienced divisions had been committed at St. Mihiel, and the first of these only began transferring to the new section of the front on September 13. Thus, the Argonne offensive would rely on less trained, less experienced divisions, several who would see action for the first time. Planning for the attack had to be accomplished quickly, and the big infantry divisions had to be moved into their assault positions in exceptionally short order. Artillery had to be brought in, positioned, and registered; and a command and communications network for the assaulting force established. Huge ammunition and supply dumps had to be constructed and filled, and a supporting logistics network established.

Mitchell led a much reduced Air Service into the Meuse-Argonne attack. Most of the Allied air units from the St. Mihiel had returned to support their armies, leaving Mitchell with a force of about 800 aircraft, 200 of them bombers. It was a major effort to concentrate the Air Service squadrons, their support equipment, and their logistical supplies secretly and quickly on new operating bases. Despite his weaker force, Mitchell used the same tactics as he had in St. Mihiel, but with fewer aircraft without the Allied units.

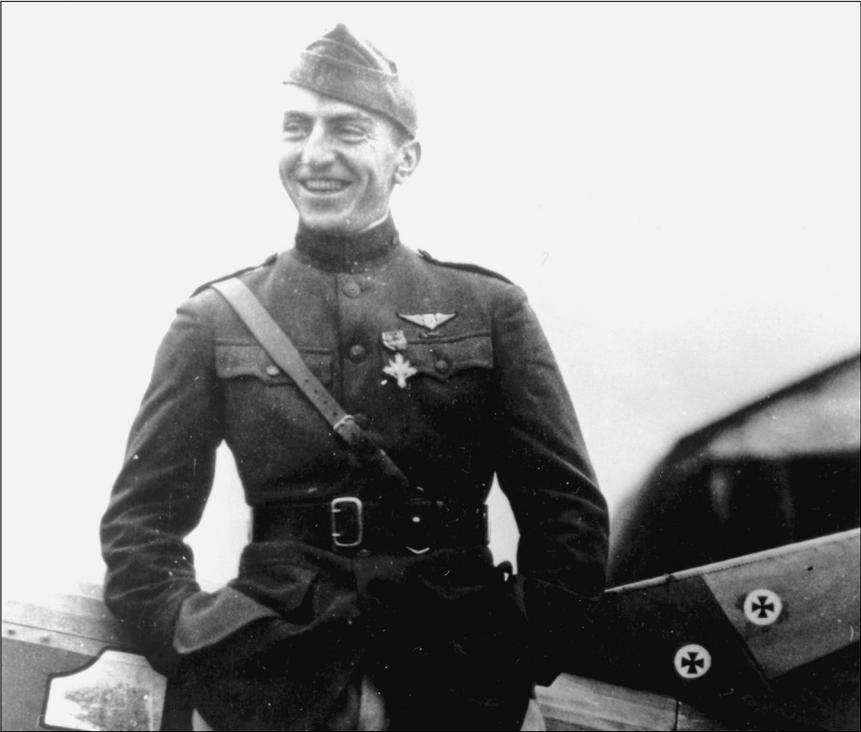
The American assault began on October 9, and quickly turned into a brutal, bloody slugging match, involving some twenty-two American and six French divisions. Ultimately, Pershing fed more than 1,000,000 troops into the fight. The enemy had had several years to construct a series of massive, interlocking defensive positions and, in contrast to St. Mihiel, they stood and fought with a tenacity that the untried American divisions found costly to overcome. The French attack on the left flank bogged down immediately, the artillery barrage was ineffective, and the few available tanks failed. Everything came down to the infantry. Casualty lists were long, and several of the big U.S. divisions were used up quickly. The increasing number of divisions necessitated the establishment of



Respected rather than liked, General Pershing exercised considerable personal leadership. Here he addresses Air Service personnel at the air field at Tours, France.

the Second and Third Army, and Pershing turned over command of First Army to Hunter Liggett and took command of the group of armies. Ultimately, after several weeks of terrible fighting the AEF broke the German lines and as of November 11, 1918—when an Armistice went into effect—its forward divisions stood at the outskirts of Sedan, long held by the Germans.

The Air Service also suffered brutal casualties in the sustained fighting. On the first day of the Meuse-Argonne attack, Mitchell's force dropped 81 tons of bombs at the cost of one airplane. After that, losses to German pursuit and ground fire were heavy. Mitchell remained committed to operating offensively, *en masse*. He attempted to use his pursuits in groups of more than 100 aircraft to oppose the enemy pursuits and to strafe enemy troop concentrations. His most massive single effort took place on October 9, when he sent out over 200 bombers and 100 pursuits. The eighteen army and corps observation squadrons probably faced the most fearful challenge, often flying at low altitudes in an effort to work with the infantry and artillery. Again, Mitchell was no headquarters operator. He continued to fly observation missions despite stiff German air opposition. In addition to combat attrition, the abnormal wear and tear on the aircraft and shortage of spares, reduced Mitchell's force steadily, a situation caused by the failure of aircraft manufacturing in the U.S. and the French failure to deliver replacements and spares. It was too much to expect French industry to supply adequately its own air force and the Air Service, AEF as well. By October 15, Mitchell could field 579 serviceable aircraft, despite the arrival of additional squadrons. His three pursuit groups were reduced to little more than 150 aircraft out of an authorized strength



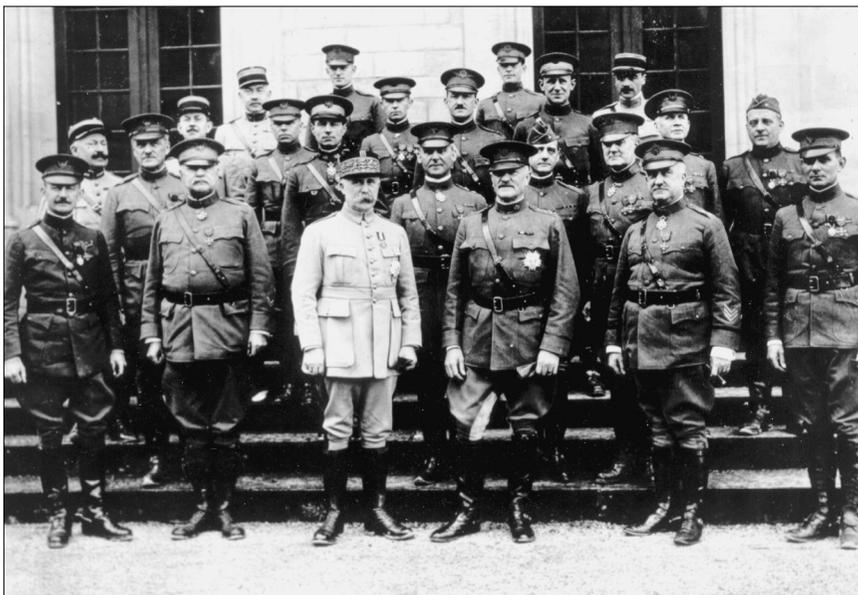
1st Lt. (later Capt.) Eddie Rickenbacker, the American “ace-of-aces” of World War I with twenty- six kills, played a major role in the fighting over St. Mihiel. Rickenbacker became and remained a close friend and ally of Billy Mitchell.

of about 300. At the Armistice, the 45 squadrons could muster only 457 serviceable aircraft. Mitchell also moved up as the AEF reorganized, becoming commander of the Air Service for the group of armies.

The Air Service of the AEF gained much of its success in World War I thanks to Billy Mitchell’s tactical skill, inspiring leadership, and offensive spirit. One would be remiss in failing to note, however, that Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick stabilized the organization of the Air Service, AEF and made it function as a unified service, and Benny Foulois effectively organized and forwarded the units and equipment Mitchell wielded at the front. Both men were extremely generous in their praise of Mitchell. General Patrick wrote that “I believe General Mitchell to be a very efficient officer. . . he possesses exceptional qualifications for leadership and . . . thinks rapidly and acts quickly He is opinionated but I have usually found him properly subordinate and ready to obey orders.” His rival, Foulois, wrote more directly that “General Mitchell had few superiors in Europe, as regards the tactical use and actual operation of Air Service in action.” More recently, historian Paul Braim in his excellent history of the Meuse-Argonne campaign, rated Mitchell highly among all AEF commanders:

Certainly there were leaders of vision and high intelligence in the AEF, George Marshall, Douglas MacArthur, Charles Summerall, John Hines, Hunter Liggett, and Hugh Drum come to mind. They saw the doctrinal and operational errors; they just did not have the time to make significant changes during the fighting. Billy Mitchell was something of a visionary, but he was right about the role of airpower in future war. Though he was a bit of a nuisance to the senior officers, he came up with a number of plans to restore maneuver to the modern battlefield.

Mitchell had done well. He had arrived in France as a major and had risen to the rank of temporary brigadier general and to command of the air service for a group of armies. He had earned the Distinguished Service Cross for valor, gained the respect of his men for his willingness to lead from the front, and placed his indelible stamp on U.S. air combat practice and doctrine with his emphasis on concentration and the offensive. To the public he was a hero; a dashing, intrepid airman of the Western Front, second to none in glamor, including aces like Eddie Rickenbacker. But, he had also proven himself opinionated and controversial, had made major enemies among the U.S. Army's future commanders, and among Air Service leaders.



General Pershing in the center and Marshal Henri-Phillipe Petain, commander of the French Army, stand with several just-decorated officers. To the left of Petain is Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett, commander of First Army. Mitchell stands in the second row between Petain and Liggett.

Finally, Mitchell had also emerged from the war with a deep commitment to the belief that the nation needed an “air force,” not an “air service” and the belief that he was the only one capable of accomplishing that change. Behind that belief was a commitment to the idea that an air force could do much more than just fight alongside ground and naval forces. He saw war as three-dimensional, not two, and believed that only experienced airmen understood how to operate successfully in that third dimension.

* * *

Following the Armistice, Mitchell was selected to head the Air Service for Maj. Gen. Theodore Dickman’s Third Army, the U.S. occupying force in Germany. Mitchell proved again to be an excellent leader, but Brig. Gen. Malin Craig was Dickman’s chief of staff and an undercurrent of “pro-Benny Foulois feeling” in Third Army Headquarters reached the ears of both Patrick and Pershing. When the new director of the Air Service in the United States, Maj. Gen. Charles T. Menoher—an artilleryman, non-flyer, and wartime commander of the 42d “Rainbow” Division—asked that Billy join him in Washington, neither Pershing nor Patrick raised objections. Mitchell returned to the United States in March 1919, bringing with him several officers who had worked for him in Europe and were thoroughly committed to an independent air force. Ultimately, Mitchell settled in as head of the Operations and Training Group in Air Service headquarters, and many of “Billy’s boys” took positions under him. Appropriately, General Menoher allowed the highly experienced Mitchell to develop plans, orchestrate training, and oversee research and development. While Menoher firmly supported Pershing’s belief in the infantry as the “Queen of Battle,” he was also a genial, highly intelligent officer with considerable common sense who might have been of considerable support in the campaign for an independent air force that Billy was about to initiate. Mitchell, instead, began to bypass his boss. Within four months, Menoher’s assistant, Lt. Col. Oscar Westover, was recommending that Mitchell be fired.

Initially, Billy retained his temporary wartime rank of brigadier general until the National Defense Act of 1920 determined the manpower level and rank structure of the postwar Army and established the Air Service as a permanent branch, separate from the Signal Corps. The act authorized the Air Service one permanent major general position for its commander and a temporary brigadier position for his deputy. Thus, instead of reverting to colonel, Mitchell retained his brigadier star. This arrangement was somewhat unfair to both Mitchell and the Air Service. Pershing and Patrick had recognized that Billy fully merited promotion to permanent brigadier general for his enormous contributions as a combat leader, and Patrick had sought that promotion for him to no avail. After the war, the final size of the Air Service itself merited more permanent flag officer positions than authorized, and certainly had one existed it would have gone to Billy. The system of the day, thus, denied him promotion to permanent flag rank that he fully merited. It could have been worse, however. Rival Benny Foulois returned from Europe as a brigadier general only to revert to his permanent rank of major—and his experience was hardly unique.



(Above) Artilleryman and distinguished commander of the 42nd (Rainbow) Infantry Division, Maj. Gen. Charles C. Menoher, Director of the Air Service, believed firmly in the infantry as the “Queen of Battle.” The genial and intelligent Menoher proved unable to control Mitchell.

(Below) Here, Mitchell, the dashing and flamboyant pilot, is at the controls of an SE-5 pursuit.



It was readily apparent that military funding would be slashed and the Air Service was going to have to compete with the rest of the Army and with the Navy for limited funds. Further, the Air Service needed its own mission possibly to even survive. Prior to returning to the United States, Mitchell spent some time with the commander of the Royal Air Force, General Trenchard. The RAF had been established on April 1, 1918, as an independent air force charged with preventing German aerial incursions while retaliating against the Germans. Under Trenchard, it had developed a strategic component, but in practice it had remained committed to direct support of the British army. Following the war, the RAF needed a mission to justify its continued separate existence, especially one that could be shown to be less costly than if done by the Army and Navy. Trenchard would prove to be a magnificent bureaucratic infighter. By 1921, he had solidified his power, placed the RAF on a strong organizational basis, and dedicate it to the mission of policing colonial territories, something that could be accomplished more cheaply and with fewer assets than if done by the traditional services.

Mitchell returned to the United States committed to the establishment of an independent air force. Over the next two years, Billy would call for new national defense organization featuring an independent air force co-equal to the Army and Navy and responsible for all military and civilian aviation in the United States. Mitchell wrote and spoke freely. His flamboyant, outgoing personality, and glamorous reputation gave him an appreciative audience in Congress and with the public. His often irreverent, colorful statements made him popular with the press, who found him “good copy.” In one example, he wrote that “to entrust the development of aviation to either the Army or the Navy is just as sensible as entrusting the development of the electric light a candle factory.” Billy Mitchell quickly became a thorn in the side of General Menoher, Chief of Staff of the Army Peyton March, and Secretary of War Newton Baker.

The Training and Operations Group became a hotbed of pro-Mitchell, pro-independent air force activity. For the time being, however, this had little to do with strategic bombing. Mitchell’s long term goal was to unite all aviation—military and civilian—into a single organization under his command, and his immediate target was coastal defense, then the responsibility of the U.S. Navy and the Army’s Coast Artillery Corps.

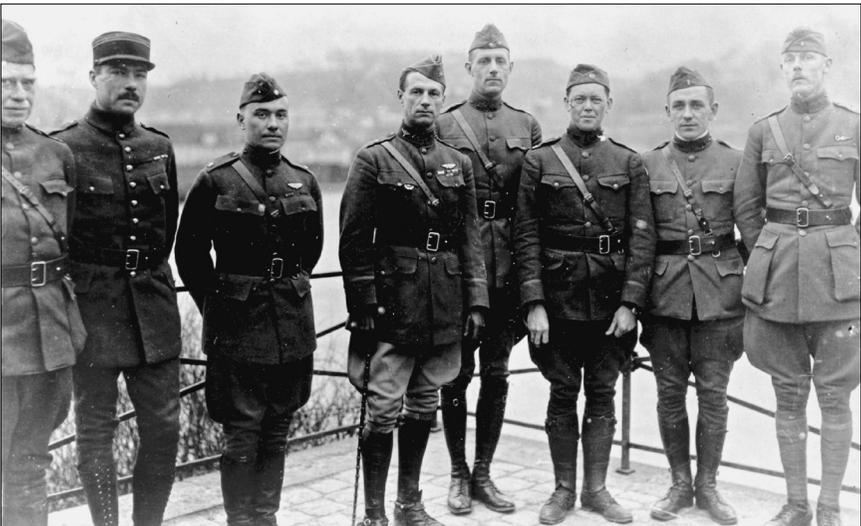
The most logical and appealing mission was long-range strategic bombing. Mitchell had spent most of World War I providing what would later be defined as battlefield air interdiction in direct support of Pershing’s combat forces, however, he was well aware of the German strategic bombing campaign waged against England and the Allied interest in developing a similar campaign against the heart of Germany. Concentrating on the job at hand, Mitchell had left the subject to others, especially pioneer military airmen Cols. Edgar S. Gorrell and William Sherman. And he played almost no role in the Handley Page Project, which called for U.S. industry to construct 100 twin-engine British Handley Page heavy bombers powered by Liberty engines. These were to be shipped to England in pieces and assembled at plants constructed for that purpose. The goal

of the program was an independent, long- range bombing force. Unfortunately, only a couple of bombers had been completed at the time of the Armistice, but had the war continued into 1919, as most planners expected, the U.S. would have fielded a strategic bombing force under existing plans.

Mitchell, however, was too much of a political realist to believe that an independent bombing force and a strategic bombardment doctrine were a practical primary mission for the Air Service in 1919. First, the purpose of the U.S. military was defense, not offense, and a force devoted to attack was politically and doctrinally unacceptable. Second, strategic bombardment suggested attacks on cities and peaceful civilians—as the German attacks on London had shown—and Secretary of War Newton Baker, a pacifist, made it absolutely clear that such a policy was totally unacceptable.

Mitchell compared the Army and Navy air services, determined that they exercised redundant responsibilities for coastal defense, and concluded that the most efficient approach would be to have the Air Service take over naval air, as well as responsibility for civilian aviation. “By a combination of these two services, with other aviation agencies,” he wrote, “we eliminate friction and antagonism, promote esprit and efficiency, and avoid duplication of work and needless expenditures.”

Mitchell made good use of the background of one of his subordinates, Lt. Col. Lewis H. Brereton, a graduate of the Naval Academy at Annapolis and veteran of the Coast Artillery Corps, in this process. When in the summer of 1919, secretary of the navy Josephus Daniels enumerated the missions he expected naval air to carry out, Brereton prepared Mitchell’s response. His assessment



Mitchell and his Third Army aviation staff stand overlooking the Rhine River in Germany following the war. Lt. Col. Lewis H. Brereton, chief of staff, is left of Mitchell in the photograph.



Mitchell found air meets and contests to be excellent venues for educating the public on air power. Here he is in his flying suit at the first Pulitzer Race, held at Mitchel Field, New York, in 1920. Army 1st Lt. Corliss C. Moseley won in a Verville racer built at McCook Field, Ohio.

boiled down to affirming that Army airmen were already accomplishing most of the responsibilities Daniels had listed, or could do most of them more effectively than could the Navy. And those the Air Service were not doing, were not worth doing anyway. In October 1919, Mitchell had Brereton prepare a study challenging the views of the General Staff on coastal defense, as well. The General Staff accepted that three forces provided coastal defense: the Navy's battle fleet, the Navy's coastal defenses, and the army's coastal defenses. The battle fleet was the offensive weapon that sought out the enemy and destroyed him. If the fleet failed, the navy's defensive forces—including submarines and naval air units—took over. If these failed, the big guns of the Army's aging fixed coastal fortifications came into play, as the last resort. In his response, Mitchell argued that airpower now held the preeminent role in coastal defense. The U.S. needed an air force to find and destroy the enemy's invasion fleet. By February 1920, Mitchell had devised a three-phase tactical plan. Phase one was reconnaissance by dirigible which would locate the enemy; phase two was an air attack to gain control of the air over the fleet; and phase three was an air attack to destroy the fleet itself, before it approached the American coast. Key to this plan was Mitchell's claim that airplanes could sink ships, all ships, even battleships. He began agitating for



Mitchell with Rear Adm. William A. Moffett, Chief of the U.S. Navy Bureau of Aeronautics. Despite the apparent civility, the two men disliked each other. Moffett proved to be an excellent bureaucratic in-fighter and effectively used the threat posed by Mitchell as a lever to pry from the battleship admirals the funds needed to build Naval Air.

the opportunity to conduct bombing trials against an battleship hull. In this, he faced serious opposition, even though the Navy was conducting its own tests.

In October 1920, Mitchell and three other army officers observed U.S. Navy tests on the old battleship, *Indiana*. His observations convinced him that the Navy was dishonest in its methodology, and was hiding from the public the truth about the airplane's real threat to capital ships. The Navy placed explosive charges in and around the *Indiana* and set them off, while the bombs dropped were dummies filled with sand. Navy leaders had also restricted publicity on these tests, but a British paper published a photograph in December and American papers then picked up the story. The result was considerable public debate over whether or not a battleship could be sunk by airplanes, with Billy Mitchell skillfully fanning the flames of the controversy from behind the scenes. In February 1921, the Navy finally invited the army to participate in bombing tests of several captured German ships—under Navy rules and supervision.

Mitchell moved quickly. The Air Service tested bombs, fuses, releases, flares, and other equipment at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. The air depot at Fairfield, Ohio, refurbished and outfitted SE-5 pursuits, and Martin,

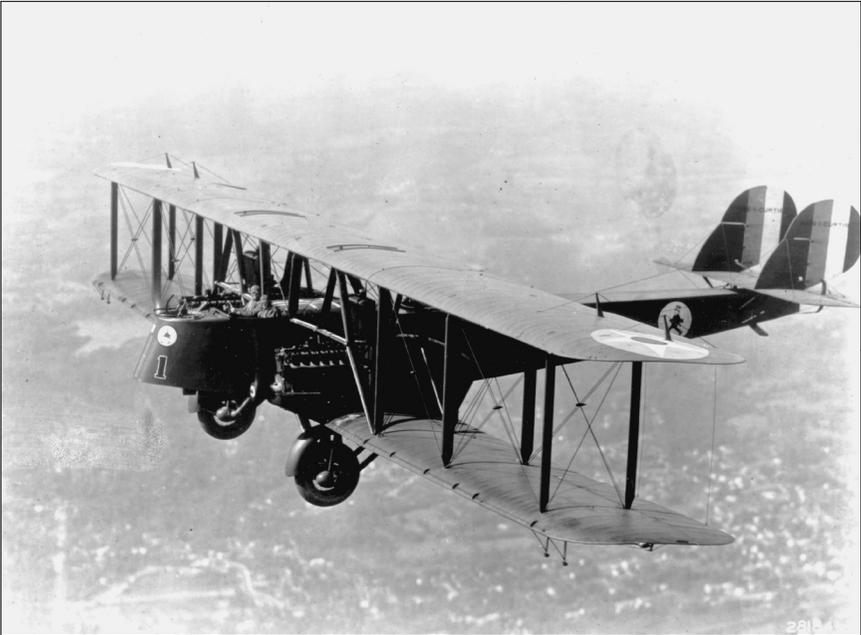
Handley Page, and Caproni bombers. Flyers at fields across the nation went into training and in May aircraft, personnel, and equipment began to arrive at Langley Field, Virginia, as the 1st Provisional Air Brigade formed under one of Billy's boys from France, Maj. Thomas DeW. Milling, now commandant of the Air Service Tactical School. On May 27, 1921, Billy Mitchell arrived from Washington and took command.

On the following day, Mitchell returned to Bolling Field in his SE-5. Six other aircraft took off at about the same time. All were caught in what Mitchell later called the most violent storm he had ever experienced. None of Mitchell's alternatives were good. He could try to land, but might crash, or he could try to return to Langley, but might get lost and blown out to sea. Typically, Mitchell decided to push ahead. Flying around storms and dodging the worst of the weather he made it safely to Bolling. World War ace Eddie Rickenbacker, also caught by the storm, told reporters that he had had the narrowest escape of his life. In contrast to Mitchell, 1st Lt. Stanley M. Ames, attempted to land his Curtiss Eagle—modified as a flying ambulance—and he and six men died in the crash. The incident generated considerable publicity. The War Department investigating board blamed the accident on the severe weather, but Mitchell disagreed. He seized the opportunity to blame the incident on the lack of regular flying routes, landing facilities, radio service, and weather bulletins.

General Menoher was livid over Mitchell's public claims and fed up with his activities. In previous months, Mitchell had gone directly to Congress and the public with his complaints, quarreled with Army and Navy leaders, and fought with Rear Adm. William A. Moffett, soon to be chief of the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics. Menoher could neither control Mitchell, nor keep track of what he was doing. Menoher now asked the new secretary of war, John W. Weeks, to remove Mitchell. Secretary Weeks was new to the job and found himself unable to act. Billy was too popular, and the impending tests were too critical, he reasoned. The secretary resorted to an unsatisfactory compromise that merely postponed the problem. Menoher was to withdraw his request that Mitchell be relieved, and Mitchell was to stop his public attacks on Menoher and remember his duty as a subordinate officer. As this storm abated for the moment, Mitchell pressed ahead with intensive training and practice.

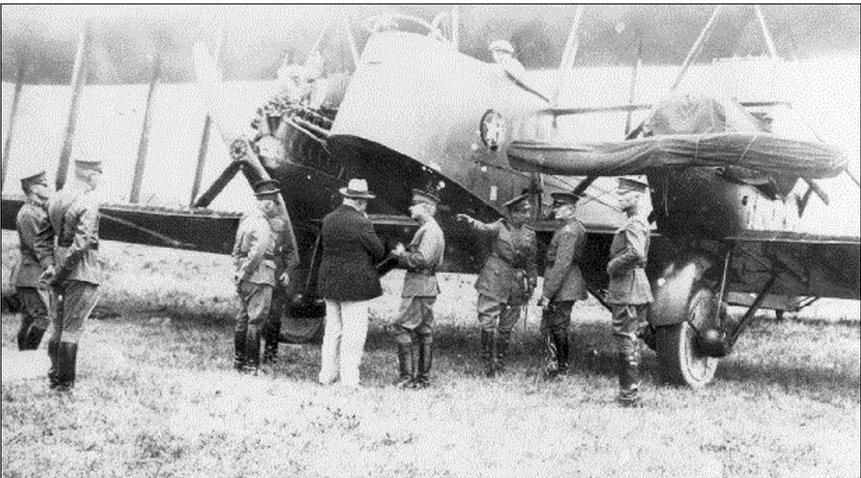
Navy plans for the tests off the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay called for the scientific evaluation of the effects of aerial bombs and naval gun fire on various sizes and classes of ships. These plans called for a carefully orchestrated series of attacks separated by frequent inspections by a Board of Observers which would document and evaluate damage. Mitchell's goal was vastly different. He wanted to sink ships—especially a battleship—as quickly and efficiently and publically as possible. The first test took place on June 21, 1921.

The target of the first test was a former German submarine, U-117. Plans called for eight divisions of naval aircraft, twenty-six planes, to attack at twenty-minute intervals, then the Army planes would be allowed to attack. U-117 did not survive the naval aircraft. Two days later, the test was to locate and assault a former U.S. Navy battleship, the *Iowa*. Controlled by radio, the *Iowa* was to be



(Above) The twin-Liberty powered Martin NBS-1, originally designated MB-2, was the Air Service's standard bomber during the 1920s. "NBS" stood for "night bombardment, short distance." This one was built under contract by Curtiss and wears the insignia of the 11th Bombardment Squadron.

(Below) Mitchell points out an item of interest to General Pershing during an inspection of the 1st Provisional Air Brigade on July 18, 1921. Secretary of War John W. Weeks stands in the center with his back to the camera. The officer on the far right is Maj. George Patton. *(Courtesy Air Combat Command History Office.)*

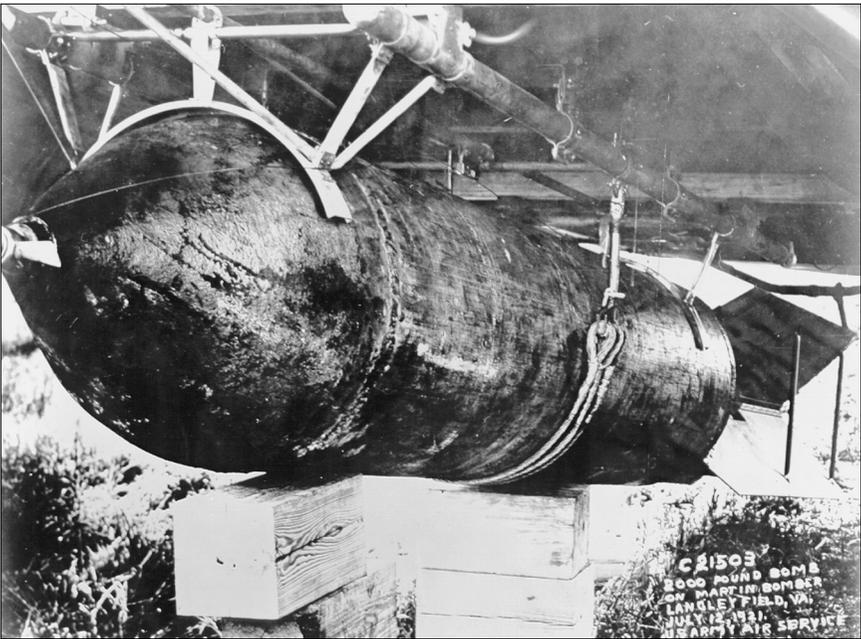


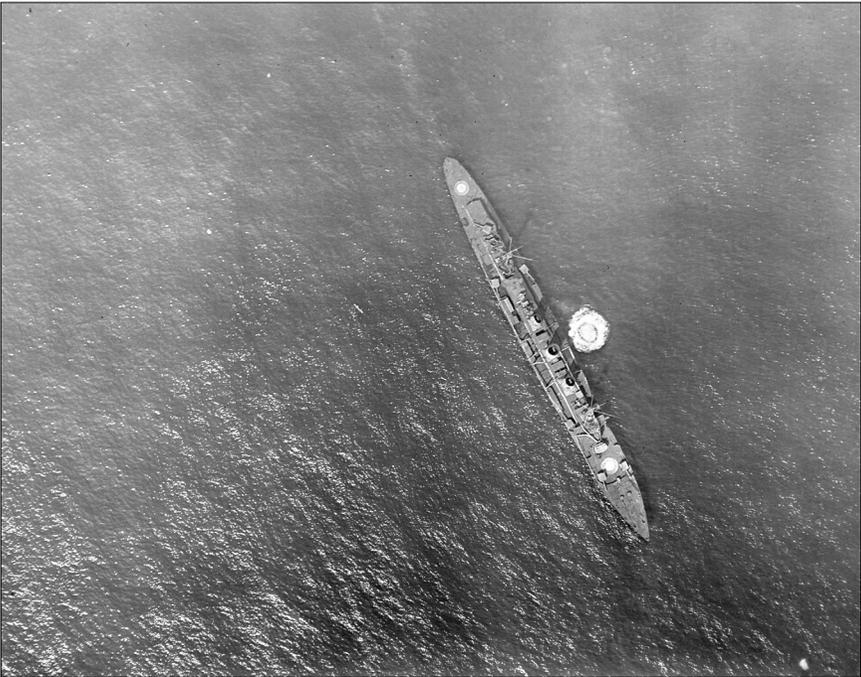
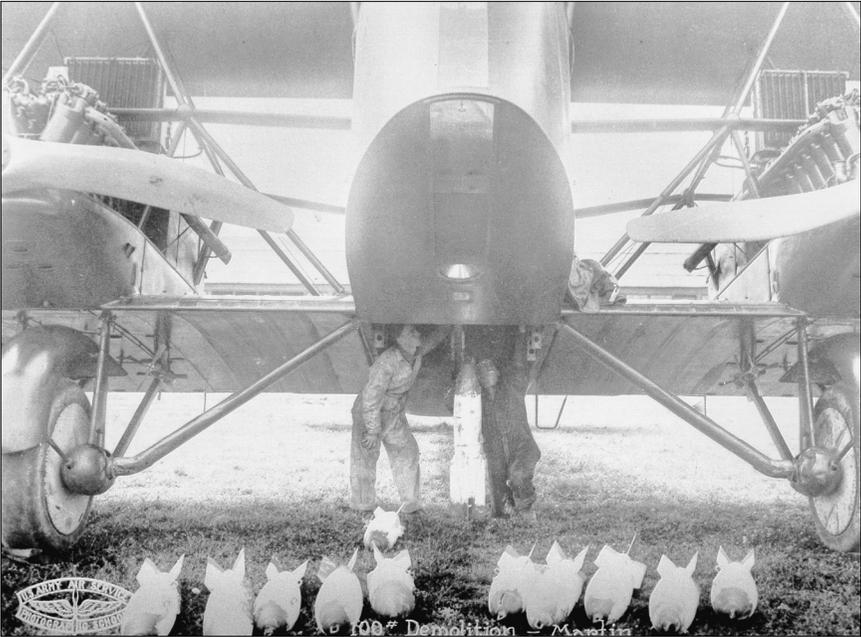


(Above) A Martin NBS-1 (MB-2) laden with a 2,000-pound demolition bomb. A smaller, probably 100-pound, bomb is attached under the wing outboard of the engine nacelle.

(Below) A 2,000-pound demolition bomb attached under a Martin bomber. The bomb rack was made by the Rock Island Arsenal especially for the 1921 bombing trials. *(These three photos courtesy Air Combat Command History Office.)*

(Opposite page, top) Loading 100-pound demolition bombs onto a MK.20 bomb rack on a Martin NBS-1 (MB-2).





During the bombing tests on the cruiser, *Frankfurt*, on July 18, 1921, a 300 lb. bomb hits next to the hull.

guided toward the shore from about 100 miles at sea. Naval and Army aircraft would locate the ship and drop dummy bombs. The *Iowa*, as in the case of the *Indiana* a year earlier would be crammed with explosive charges that could be detonated separately. Mitchell refused to take part in this sort of farce, as he saw it, thus the *Iowa* was left to the Navy.

On July 13, Mitchell and the 1st Provisional Air Brigade got their first opportunity. The target was the ex-German destroyer G-102, and the Army had first crack. Navy aircraft and ships would stand in reserve in case the Army aviators failed. Mitchell coordinated the effort from the air in "the Osprey," his personal De Havilland DH-4. As he watched, SE-5 pursuits strafed and bombed using twenty-five-pound personnel bombs, in theory clearing the ship's decks. In four passes, the SE-5s achieved twenty-five hits. Following the pursuits were sixteen Martin MB-2 bombers. One-by-one, each aircraft dropped two 300-pound demolition bombs from 1,500 feet. Most of the aircraft hit close, and two achieved direct hits with both bombs. When the bombers began their second round of attacks the destroyer was already settling by the stern. Three more bombs sent her to the bottom. On July 18, the Army and Navy took turns bombing the cruiser *Frankfurt*, the Navy dropping 250-pound and some 550-pound bombs, the Army using its 300- and then 600-pounders. The first round of Army-Navy attacks caused limited damage to the hull. The bigger bombs were another matter, and a series of hits by those dropped from Martin MB-2s sent the *Frankfurt* to the bottom.

The denouement took place on July 21. On the previous day, July 20, the observer ships had positioned themselves near the anchored *Ostfriesland*. A distrustful Mitchell, so close to his objective, feared a Navy trick and requested immediate permission to attack. When the attacks did begin, Navy aircraft went first followed by the Army, but then an approaching storm interrupted the tests. Inspectors found that little damage had been done to the upper structure of the vessel, but the hull was another matter. The ship was listing to port and down by the stern. Now, on July 21, the scene was once again set and the observers in place. Those aboard the *U.S.S. Henderson* included Secretary of War John W. Weeks, Secretary of the Navy Edwin Denby, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Gen. John J. Pershing, Chief of the Air Service Maj. Gen. Charles Menoher, pioneer airplane manufacturer Glenn Martin; senators, representatives, foreign observers, reporters, and Mitchell's friend, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Zachary Landdowne. On the following morning, Army bombers led off the first attacks with 1,100-pound bombs. The first bomb dropped hit on the forecastle. The Navy issued a cease bombing order, but eager Army pilots dropped four more bombs before pausing. Two were hits. Following a leisurely examination, the inspectors reported damage to the main battery and a hole in the starboard side. *Ostfriesland* was taking on water. Toward noon, Mitchell led eight Martin and three Handley Page bombers carrying 2,000-pound bombs. The rules called for the Army to drop no more than three bombs with two direct hits. Then the inspectors would go aboard. Mitchell, however, was neither interested in hits nor playing by Navy rules. He ordered his pilots to go for near misses in the belief that



A bomb lands forward of the *Ostfriesland* on July 21, 1921.

the force of the water was more damaging. He was right. The second bomb exploded next to *Ostfriesland* and in a few minutes the ship rolled over and disappeared. Mitchell and his men had accomplished what they had set out to do, and that night they threw a huge party in the Langley Field Officer's Club. The Air Service would sink other battleships during later tests—the *Virginia* and the *North Carolina* most notably—but no test would ever provide greater satisfaction or impact than the destruction of the *Ostfriesland*.

What did the 1921 tests actually accomplish? Mitchell reported that they proved “that sea craft of all kinds, up to and including the most modern battleships, can be destroyed easily by bombs dropped from aircraft, and further, that the most effective means of destruction are bombs. [They] demonstrated beyond a doubt that, given sufficient bombing planes—in short an adequate air force—aircraft constitute a positive defense of our country against hostile invasion.” The Navy agreed, but in less cataclysmic terms. The official Board of Observers concluded “that the airplane is a powerful weapon of offense” and that it was a fact that “the ships so attacked, whether submarine, destroyer, cruiser, or battleship, were eventually sunk, and by airplanes with bombs alone.” However, the Navy also noted things that Mitchell, in his enthusiasm, preferred to ignore. The ships sunk had been at anchor and unable to maneuver. There were no crews or equipment aboard to provide damage control and keep the vessels afloat. And the total absence of defensive anti-aircraft fire gave the attackers a free hand. Finally, the weather was good and a line of destroyers had guided the bombers to their targets. A hostile fleet was unlikely to provide these advantages.

* * *

A triumphant Mitchell immediately moved to exploit the favorable publicity generated by the successful bombing trials. On July 29, he led the 1st Provisional Air Brigade in a simulated attack on New York City. Seventeen

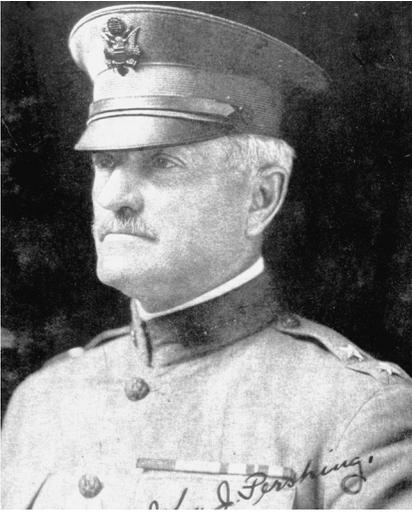
Martin bombers, one Handley Page, and one Caproni approached the city in V formation, then changed to line of battle. The formation made a bombing run at 8,000 feet on lower Manhattan, turned over Central Park, and made a return run. After landing at nearby Mitchel Field, Billy told reporters that Manhattan had been “demolished” by twenty-one tons of demolition, incendiary, and poison gas bombs, and its people were either dead or fleeing. He placed his aircraft on public display, while the aircrews toured and celebrated in the city they had just “destroyed.” The Air Brigade then returned to Langley Field, “bombing” Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore on the way. Mitchell’s force also “lev-elled” the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis for good measure.

On August 29, Mitchell submitted his report on the bombing trials. It was a scathing rebuttal of the official report on the trials that ended with a call for an independent air force and a department of national defense. In essence, Mitchell concluded, Americans could no longer look to the oceans for protection. Airpower had changed the equation, making the nation vulnerable to attack. “An efficient solution of our defense needs will not exist until a Department of National Defense is organized,” he wrote. The Army could defend the land; the Navy the high seas, but an independent air force was required for frontier and coastal defense. “Aviation,” Mitchell emphasized, “can only be developed under its own direction and control.”

Menoher noted his disapproval. He also either planned to pigeon hole the report or, more probably pass it to Secretary Weeks. He never had the opportunity. Secretary Weeks read it in the September 14 issue of the *New York Times*, to which it had leaked, causing a public sensation. This event revived the situation that Weeks had failed to deal with in June and was the final straw for General Menoher. He demanded that Weeks either support his effort to discipline Mitchell, or accept his resignation. Weeks accepted Menoher’s resignation.

Mitchell’s future, meanwhile, became a major subject for speculation. His friends and supporters believed that he would replace Menoher, especially after the spectacular success of the bombing trials. Other believed that he would leave the service if not made chief, and he certainly had an offer of an executive position with Eddie Rickenbacker’s automobile company. But someone else was waiting in the wings.

Pershing, who became chief of staff on July 1, solved the controversy by calling once again on his former West Point classmate. Following the war, Mason Patrick—reduced from major general to his permanent rank of colonel—had taken charge of the engineering district in New Orleans, then in 1920 moved to Washington, D.C., where he did little substantive work for almost a year. In June 1921, he was ordered to nearby Fort Humphrey (now Fort Belvoir) Virginia, where he commanded the engineering school and began preparing for retirement. But on August 29, Secretary of War Weeks dropped by ostensibly to tour the post, in reality to look over Patrick. On September 28, Colonel Patrick received a formal request that he take over the Air Service again. He was not at all thrilled. The Air Service was at the brink of collapse and was unable to address all of its peacetime duties, much less than wartime responsibilities. Ultimately, however, his



(Top left) The new Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army on July 1, 1921, was Gen. John J. “Black Jack” Pershing. Billy Mitchell and the Air Service posed one of the first problems Pershing had to deal with.

(Top right) Following General Menoher’s resignation and as he had done in France in 1918, Pershing appointed his former classmate from West Point, Mason M. Patrick, Chief of the Air Service. This photo is of Patrick as a major general wearing his pilot’s wings.

(Above) Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell, Assistant Chief of the Air Service, at the summit of his career.



Patrick liked Mitchell, but his first job as Chief was to bring him to heel. When Mitchell learned Patrick meant to be commander in practice as well as name, he threatened to resign. Patrick called his bluff.

sense of duty outweighed his reservations. On October 5, Patrick accepted and took command the Air Service with the rank of major general.

Patrick thought highly of Mitchell, later writing that Billy was “very likeable and has ability; his ego is highly developed and he has an undoubted love for the limelight; a desire to be in the public eye. He is forceful, aggressive, spectacular. He had a better knowledge of the tactics of air fighting than any man in this country. . . . I think I understood quite well his characteristics, the good in him—and there was much of it—and his faults.” But in 1921, Patrick probably expected a confrontation with Mitchell. It took place almost immediately. Billy had drawn up a new organizational plan for the Air Service that in essence placed him in charge. Patrick disapproved the plan and made it clear that he, Patrick, would be in charge. Billy threatened to resign and Patrick called his bluff, Mitchell reconsidered his position and accepted that Patrick was in command.

Mitchell once again settled down and applied himself to his work. He remained flamboyant, highly visible, and forthright, but under Patrick’s guidance ceased courting notoriety. He took a major role in the organization and administration of the Air Service; pushed the technical development of new equipment and aircraft; and worked to develop Air Service tactics and doctrine. He flew often, and in 1922 even held the world speed record for a day or so. General Patrick also kept him busy with inspection trips to Air Service fields and depots throughout the nation. And he was a common sight at aviation contests, horse meets, and society events in Washington.

Mitchell took two international tours of major significance. The first was to Europe in January 1922 to evaluate developments in aviation. He took with him aeronautical engineer Alfred Verville and one of his pilots who had hit the

Ostfriesland, 1st Lt. Clayton L. Bissell. They visited England where Mitchell spent time with General Trenchard. In France he attended a conference on French military aviation chaired by Marshall Marie Émile Fayolle and renewed acquaintance with many old friends. In Germany he toured and admired the Zeppelin company and its products, and met future leaders of the *Luftwaffe* including old foes, Herman Goering and Ernst Udet. Of all the stops Mitchell made, however, those in Italy seem to have been the most important. There, Billy praised the Italian interest in dirigibles both for coastal defense and offensive operations. Mitchell also visited the Caproni company in Milan, producer of some of the finest bombers in the world, and spent time with its owner, Giovanni Caproni, a friend of the earliest and most noteworthy of the airpower theorists, Guilio Douhet. Douhet had begun writing before World War I, but his major work, *Il Domino dell 'Aria (Command of the Air)*, was only published in 1921. Mitchell may or may not have met Douhet, during the trip. It is generally agreed that the Italian's views of strategic bombardment began entering Mitchell's thinking through Caproni.

Mitchell produced and distributed his own bombing manual in 1923, "Notes on the Multi- Motored Bombardment Group," which was far ahead of his time, although not the clarion call for strategic bombardment as it would later develop. In it, he separated military from civilian targets and limited the latter to rarely conducted "reprisal raids" that would have a "moral effect." And in designating the former he made it clear that he was not just discussing wars limited to the immediate defense of U.S. territory. "The attack of objectives on land," he wrote, "is the normal mission of bombardment." And targets ranged from those in direct support of an enemy force such as aerodromes, transportation centers, ammunition an supply dumps, headquarters, convoys, and columns of troops through strategic targets such as telegraph and telephone centers, bridges, dams, manufacturing centers, water supplies, and growing grain. This type of warfare, he opined, might shorten wars. The bombing force, he also pointed out, needed pursuits to clear the air. With control of the air, bombers could reach any target with impunity. Bombing units were also dependent upon successful supply, and he advocated construction of specially-designed air transport aircraft. Much of what Mitchell advocated was unavailable in 1923, but as a blueprint for air warfare twenty years in the future, his bombing manual was a *tour de force*.

From December 1922 through July 1923, Mitchell was abroad on his second major tour, which also served as a honeymoon. He and his second wife, Elizabeth Trumbull Miller, began their lengthy tour of the Pacific in Hawaii, where Mitchell toured the defenses and reviewed war plans. From Hawaii, he and his wife went to the Philippines, where he found the air defenses, base facilities, training situation, and living conditions to be deplorable. The Mitchell's also toured Singapore, India, China, and Manchuria. He was denied official entry into the Japanese Empire, but spent a day or two as a "tourist" in Nagasaki.

Upon his return from the Far East in July 1924, Mitchell submitted an extensive 325-page "Report of Inspection." In essence, this was a blueprint of the next war in the Pacific, as Billy envisioned it. Mitchell's overall views reflected those

he had held in 1909-1911. In essence, war with Japan was inevitable. The Japanese would begin the conflict with a surprise attack on Hawaii, and, since U.S. military strength was so overwhelming, Japan could only resort to the most modern methods possible—airpower. Further, the islands in the Pacific were critical because of their value as bases for aircraft. In this, he reflected his own belief that land-based air was always superior to seaborne aviation. Thus he believed that the Japanese would have to seize Midway and Niihau Islands—part of the Hawaiian chain—first. Once based within range, Japanese forces could launch air attacks to destroy Hawaii's defenses. This view reflected Mitchell's continued belief that the aircraft carrier was an ineffective weapon.

Mitchell also assessed U.S. defenses in the Philippines and Hawaii and found them to be in deplorable condition, especially where aviation was concerned. His assessment caused no problems in the Philippines. Mitchell's report was tactful and no surprise to local commanders. Hawaii was another matter. In command of the Hawaiian Military Department was one of the most distinguished leaders in the U.S. Army, the proud and somewhat touchy Maj. Gen. Charles P. Summerall. Summerall had extended every courtesy during Mitchell's visit, and when Billy departed there was no hint of a problem. Billy's report, however, was highly critical of Summerall's command and the condition of the Air Service units based there. Worse, he gave General Summerall no advanced warning of the contents of his report. General Patrick tried to placate Summerall by noting that the report was a largely conjectural exercise about a possible future war, but his comments did little to soothe the general.

Mitchell also appears to have returned from his trip with a new stridency, with renewed impatience. For reasons beyond Patrick's control, the Air Service had deteriorated between 1920 and 1923 in the quality of its aircraft and equipment, as well as in personnel strength. Mitchell returned to making pronouncements; often farseeing, imaginative claims that frequently failed to take into account the real state of air power capability at the time. Such assertions were especially visible in a speech in October to the National Aeronautical Association, in which he represented Calvin Coolidge at the President's request. Mitchell thus placed himself on Coolidge's personal black list. Additionally, he agreed to write several articles on airpower and the future of air war for the *Saturday Evening Post*. But, without asking Secretary of War Weeks, he went directly to President Coolidge for permission. Secretary Weeks was left completely out of the decision-making process.

Other problems piled up. On September 14, 1924, Gen. John L. Hines, a close friend of Pershing and veteran commander of the 4th Infantry Division became the new chief of staff, while Maj. Gen. Dennis Nolan became Hines's deputy chief of staff. Hines's assistant chief of staff was Brig. Gen. Hugh Drum. As already seen, neither Nolan nor Drum had any love for Mitchell. Both would lobby to have someone else replace him when his four-year-tour as assistant chief of the Air Service came to an end.

Then, during the Lampert committee hearings in January 1925, Mitchell expressed his pent-up frustration. As usual, he demanded creation of an inde-



Mitchell's most dedicated opponent on the General Staff was Hugh A. Drum, here shown as a major general. Drum was brilliant, but he had little use for either an independent air force or for Billy Mitchell. His testimony at the Morrow Board just prior to Mitchell's courts-martial was a comprehensive statement of the traditional Army view of air power.

pendent air force and a department of national defense, but he also accused the General Staff of suppressing testimony by officers before Congress and described a cabal of special, vested interests denying proper defense to the American people. Particularly infuriating to many, he rubbed more salt into wounds by stating: "It is a very serious question whether airpower is auxiliary to the Army and the Navy, or whether armies and navies are not actually auxiliary to airpower."

An infuriated Weeks demanded that Mitchell prove his charges. Billy submitted a "detailed and patronizing justification for his testimony," but Weeks's patience had run out. While Patrick had recommended that Mitchell be reappointed as assistant chief of the Air Service, the secretary of war refused. Patrick then selected Lt. Col. James E. Fechet, commander of the Advanced Flying School in San Antonio, Texas, to replace Mitchell on April 26, 1925. Mitchell



Among Mitchell's friends was the great humorist, Will Rogers, sitting here on the fuselage of Mitchell's aircraft. Rogers dropped in unexpectedly during the courts-martial to lend support.

reverted to his permanent rank of colonel and became air officer of Eighth Corps Area headquartered at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. His farewell was amicable. Mitchell bore no enmity for Mason Patrick, who had supported him for three years and advocated his reappointment as assistant chief. And Patrick remained a supporter. Speaking at Billy's farewell, he "paid him high tribute, saying that he believed that General Mitchell had done more for the Air Service than, perhaps, any other man."

It is unclear why Mitchell decided to speak out in the way that he did. However, it seems logical that he was frustrated over what he saw as three years decline in airpower, a situation that, in fact, continued to get worse. Congress continued to cut Air Service appropriations, the Air Service continued to lose personnel and equipment from an already inadequate and increasingly obsolescent force. Mitchell's tours, especially that to the Pacific convinced him that the United States was in greater danger than leaders at home realized, making the lack of progress an even greater threat. Neither the War Department nor Mason Patrick appeared—to him—to share his anxiety and sense of urgency. Finally, the Lampert hearings gave him the opportunity to protest in public, and he did so. Ultimately, it was not just Mitchell's words that led him into trouble, but the intemperance with which he used them. In the words of one historian, Mitchell "was banished to the hinterland of the Air Service realm not only for what he said and wrote, but also for the stridency of his tone and his unorthodox public

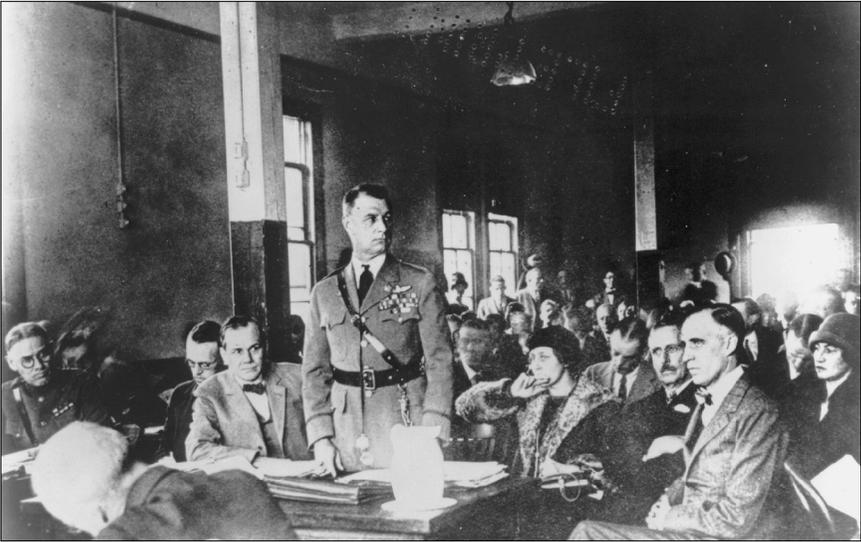


Billy Mitchell, his second wife, Elizabeth Trumbull Miller, and his military aides on their way to the Emory Building in Washington, DC, site of the court-martial. Elizabeth's wealthy father financed Mitchell's defense.

approach." Further, his statements were bold and sweeping and not always factual, something that would get him in trouble in the near future.

Unfortunately, exile to Texas failed to keep Billy quiet. He published several articles and, in August 1925, a book, *Winged Defense*, which was little more than a "hastily compiled collection" of previously published articles and speeches, illustrated inside the covers with newspaper cartoons that lampooned his opponents, including Secretary Weeks. The book itself was disorganized and repetitive, and poorly timed since Weeks was seriously ill.

Then, on August 31, 1925, three Navy flying boats took off from California in an attempt to fly from San Francisco to Hawaii, a feat that had yet to be accomplished. Mechanical problems downed two aircraft early in the flight, and naval ships had to rescue their crews. Close to Hawaii, the third disappeared completely. Several days later, it was finally found drifting and the crew rescued. While the search for the missing seaplane was in progress, however, on September 3 another disaster followed. The Navy had ordered the great dirigible *Shenandoah* on a tour of Midwest at a time when sudden thunderstorms were common. The dirigible was under the command of Mitchell's friend, Lt. Cdr. Zachary Lansdowne, the same officer who had stood on the deck of the *Henderson* as Billy's men sank the *Ostfriesland*. Near Caldwell, Ohio, the dirigible hit a powerful line squall that tore it apart, killing fourteen men, including Lansdowne.



At a dramatic moment in the court-martial, Mitchell, standing, looks to his left as Elizabeth Mitchell reacts. Sitting on Mitchell's right is his civilian defense counsel, Congressman Frank Reed of Illinois.

On September 5, Mitchell called six local reporters into his office and issued a statement that read in part: "These accidents are the result of the incompetency, the criminal negligence, and the most treasonable negligence of our national defense by the Navy and War Departments." This charge, as Billy knew and intended, was something that the Department of War and the Coolidge administration could not ignore.

A quiet investigation ensued, and Mitchell was ordered back to Washington in September 1925, where he would stand courts-martial on the charge of "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline and in a way to bring discredit upon the military service." Mitchell selected Congressman Frank Reid to be his civilian defense counsel.

Before the court-martial convened, however, another significant development occurred. Embarrassed by the continuing controversy over an independent air arm, President Coolidge determined to sort out the confusion over aviation by appointing businessman Dwight Morrow to head a special board. Coolidge intended to resolve some of the aviation questions that had dominated headlines before the Mitchell court-martial assumed center stage, and, as a preventive measure, might also draw the fangs of Billy Mitchell. The Morrow Board was made up of distinguished military and civilians selected to inspire the confidence of the public, the Congress, and the military, and its conduct was the ultimate in unsensational propriety.

The usual cast of Army and Navy leaders testified before the Morrow Board, but the star was Maj. Gen. Hugh Drum who put forth the Army argument against an independent air force and for a combined arms team clearly and succinctly with abundant evidence from the Great War. Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick presented the only new idea in a month of testimony by outlining his request for an Air Corps similar to the Marine Corps. Mitchell appeared before the board on September 29, but not as a sworn witness. Instead, he gave testimony without interruption for questions. It was not the flamboyant Mitchell who sat in the chair before the Board, however. Unaccountably, instead of calling on his dynamic speaking ability, Mitchell read whole chapters from *Winged Defense* into the record in a dull monotone, and Morrow, who could have stopped him at any time, let him drone on and on. It thus became abundantly clear that Billy had nothing new to say. And by not challenging Mitchell, Morrow prevented him from generating controversy. Thus, the Morrow Board—reporting after the Mitchell court-martial began—presented stolid, unimaginative, and—perhaps most important to the President—inexpensive recommendations that added minimum additional cost to the budget. The Morrow report reassured the nation that it was safe from aerial attack. It concluded that a clear separation should exist between military and civilian aviation; specified that the Army and Navy would retain their air arms; approved Patrick’s concept of an Army Air Corps; and advocated a five-year buildup of the Army air arm.

Meanwhile, Mitchell’s career came to an end, though in many ways the court-martial was more aftermath than central event. It was, however, one of the great trials of the early twentieth century, ranking in its day with those of Sacco and Vanzetti, Leopold and Loeb, John Scopes, and Bruno Hauptman. It had fireworks, especially, when Mitchell challenged the president of the court, Gen. Charles Summerall, off the bench. And Billy’s defense team made every effort to turn the event into a trial of airpower, not just of Mitchell. The Navy monitored the event closely, and provided assistance to the Army prosecution team, proving that the two services could work together when their interests dove-tailed. But in the final analysis the verdict was a forgone conclusion. Mitchell was found guilty. The sentence, on the other hand, was probably somewhat of a surprise. Cashiering Billy had the potential of creating a martyr, something no one but his friends wanted. Instead, the court sentenced him to five years suspension without pay. And after review, President Coolidge reduced the sentence to five years on half pay. The difference meant little to Mitchell. He lived beyond his means anyway and could not afford go on half pay for five years, then return to active duty for the three years he needed to reach retirement. On February 1, 1926, he resigned from the Army. Other than howls from Mitchell supporters like the American Legion and friends like Eddie Rickenbacker, public reaction was muted and short-lived. Congressman Fiorello La Guardia of New York introduced a bill limiting the court-martial to the power of sentencing Mitchell for no more than thirty days. Congressman Thomas Blanton of Texas, sought to abolish all peacetime court-martials, restore Mitchell to brigadier general, and sentence Generals Drum and Nolan as well as two members of the court to five-year suspensions.

Mitchell and his wife retired to their estate near Middleburg, Virginia, where Mitchell enjoyed the life of a horseman and country gentleman. He still had to make a living and tried for a time through writing and speaking. Both petered out rather quickly. As it had become apparent during the Morrow Board, Mitchell had little new to add to the discussion and resignation from the Army cut him off from sources of new information. Besides, the Morrow Board addressed many of the elements of the controversy—no matter how imperfectly—for the time being, and both Congress and the public soon found the subject dull. Other concerns rose to importance, especially after the crash of the stock market in 1929. Airpower ceased to be of interest or importance to a people plunged into the depths of the Great Depression.

Mitchell himself increasingly moved toward long-range strategic bombing as the key to successful war and adopted Douhet's "vital centers" arguments based on the Italian's *Il Domino dell'Aria*, and especially after the same theme appeared in a neatly written, clearly organized work, *Paris: On the Future of War*, which appeared in 1925. But Billy's evolving beliefs had little real impact.

Mitchell also looked into politics. However, his home state was Wisconsin, his residence was in Virginia, and he maintained a home in Washington, complicating the matter. He had little real knowledge of Wisconsin issues or politics and no political base within the state. Thus, he appears never to have seriously considered running. A good Democrat, like his father, Mitchell gained considerable political capital with the party during the 1928 presidential election by stumping across the country at his own expense for candidate Alfred E. Smith. Smith lost, but Mitchell's efforts placed him in good position in 1932, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was a guaranteed winner. Billy had several talks with candidate Roosevelt and appears to have believed that he had been promised that when the FDR was elected, he would revamp the U.S. defense system and create a cabinet-level position for aviation that Mitchell would fill. In reality, FDR was a brilliant practitioner of the politician's art of telling people what they wanted to hear. He gained Mitchell's aid—Billy helped line up support for FDR from the Virginia Democratic Party—but probably never had any intention of making serious changes in U.S. defense policy, certainly not immediately. Further, as a former assistant secretary, FDR accepted the traditional view that the U.S. Navy was the nation's first line of defense. He had also run up against Mitchell during the Army-Navy controversies in 1919-1920. At the time of the courts-martial, FDR told his son that he had little sympathy for the airpower advocate's position. Following the 1932 election, Billy lost access to the President.

In 1933, Mitchell and his followers launched his last campaign to establish an independent air force, but despite some political support inside Congress, the effort made no headway. Its main impact may have been at the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field, Alabama, where instructors like Maj. Harold George, Lt. Kenneth N. Walker, and others were already busily polishing and openly advocating a doctrine of long-range, strategic bombardment. These and other young officers had a better practical sense of what was possible than had Mitchell. They also enjoyed the promise of better bombers. The Boeing B-9 and

Martin B-10—low wing, all-metal monoplane bombers with every technological improvement available and twice the speed of those Mitchell had known—were already in hand, and by 1935 the four-engine Boeing B-17 was already on the horizon.

Billy did not live to see his ideas come to fruition. He took ill in January 1936 and entered a New York hospital. On the same day, the House Military Affairs Committee began considering a bill to restore him to the Army's retired list as a colonel. The dilemma the committee members faced; however, was in many ways the tragic one that Mitchell had created. How could they honor him for the real services he had given the nation without seeming to condone his methods? The measure failed. It was Billy Mitchell's last disappointment before his death on February 17, 1936.

* * *

Billy Mitchell is with us today—both as a symbol and in the practical results of his campaign for independent airpower. The symbol is obvious. Mitchell remains the single most famous, significant, and controversial figure in the history of American airpower. In the years following the court-martial and his early death, and despite the efforts of many Army leaders to suppress his impact, Billy became a martyr to the cause of independent airpower and to the mission of long-range, strategic bombardment. He was the most prominent American to advocate a vision of strategic airpower that would ultimately come to dominate future warfare, and he remains the most prominent figure today.

Mitchell's methodology, however, was self-defeating. His willingness to appeal to Congress and the public outside the chain of command in the face of rules, regulations, and direct orders offended those who should have been his greatest backers. Inadvertently, Mitchell did spur naval air leaders toward their goal of developing carrier aviation. They were successful in great part, because leaders like Rear Adm. William A. Moffett—who headed the Bureau of Aeronautics for eleven years until his death in the crash of the rigid airship *U.S.S. Akron* in 1933—proved more adroit bureaucratic infighters than Mitchell's temperament allowed him to be. If Mitchell was not the father of naval air, as some have written, he was at least its godfather. Within the U.S. Army, it took the far-sighted, mature, capable leadership of Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick to match that of Admiral Moffett, his counterpart, and enable the Air Service to progress during the 1920s. Mitchell's vision of the future, however, more than offset his flaws; a future that sustained the U.S. Army Air Forces and the fledgling U.S. Air Force through their darkest hours.

Likewise, the practical result of Mitchell's campaign is obvious. The U.S. Air Force is Billy Mitchell's physical legacy. Much of this success came through Billy's boys, the younger officers who heeded his message and remained committed to his cause. Mitchell's vision remained alive in Air Corps headquarters under its successive chiefs, Mason Patrick, Maj. Gen. James E. Fechet, and, somewhat ironically, Mitchell's old adversary, Maj. Gen. Benny Foulois, who became chief in December 1931. The vision took a hiatus under Maj. Gen. Oscar Westover, who became chief in 1935 and who held strong convictions that the air arm should



Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick's great contribution to independent air power was the establishment of the Army Air Corps, approved by President Coolidge on July 2, 1926. Mitchell and his followers condemned the Air Corps as an ineffective half-way measure. The leaders of the new Air Corps in 1926 included left to right General Patrick, Brig. Gen. James E. Fechet, Assistant Chief of the Air Corps, and Brig. Gen. Frank P. Lahm, Commanding General of the Air Corps Training Center at San Antonio, Texas. The other was Brig. Gen. William E. Gillmore, Chief of the Materiel Division at Dayton, Ohio.

remain subordinate to the Army and under the control of the General Staff. Mitchell's concepts, did not disappear, however, they simply shifted base to Langley Field, Virginia, where Maj. Gen. Frank Andrews established GHQ Air Force in that same year. Fiery proponents of independence and strategic bombardment on his staff included Hugh Knerr and George Kenney, and they had a practical tool to experiment with—the Boeing B-17 “Flying Fortress.” Perhaps Andrews's greatest service took place in 1939, however, when he escorted Maj. Gen. George C. Marshall, soon to be Deputy Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, on a nine-day flying tour by B-17 of GHQ Air Force facilities across the nation, including the Boeing production plant outside Seattle, Washington. Andrews and Marshall became close friends, and the tour was a profound education on airpower for the future Chief of Staff. In the words of writer DeWitt S. Copp, Andrews “guided his perceptive and open-minded guest through the ambit of all that was embodied in making a clenched fist out of airpower—everything from training to precision bombing.” “Clenched fist”—shades of Billy Mitchell at the St Mihiel!

In the meantime, Mitchell's vision also followed the career of one of his strongest supporters and close personal friends, Henry H. "Hap" Arnold. With Billy out of the picture after 1925, Arnold found himself *de facto* leader of the independent air force faction, along with such close friends as Herbert Dargue, Ira Eaker, and Carl "Tooe" Spaatz, another Mitchell favorite. But Arnold got himself in trouble just after the Mitchell court-martial and a furious Mason Patrick exiled him to Ft. Riley, Kansas. From limbo, Arnold quietly worked himself back into good graces. He remained as committed to an independent air force and strategic bombardment as ever, but ceased being a visible advocate and began working for change within the command system. In 1938, he became chief of the Air Corps following Westover's death in an aircraft accident. Arnold thus guided the Army Air Corps through the build-up and modernization that created the U.S. Army Air Forces in 1941, and he successfully wielded that mighty weapon throughout World War II.

It is perhaps too much to say that, after the U.S. Army Air Forces's great contributions to victory during that conflict, an independent air force was inevitable. There was really no guarantee of independence following World War II. The final step probably depended upon one individual. George Catlett Marshall recognized what was required and in 1943 directed his staff to prepare a study for an independent air force that would follow the victory to come.

In March 1946, another one of "Billy's boys," Gen. Carl Spaatz, replaced his friend, Hap Arnold, as commander of the U.S. Army Air Forces. Under Spaatz's leadership began the postwar creation of an independent air force as a force-in-being unprecedented in peacetime, a new entity that would provide a standing military force alert to retaliate against an aggressor's capacity to wage war. Airpower would become the primary instrument of American foreign policy. On July 26, 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947 creating a National Military Establishment including a Department of the Army, a Department of the Navy, and a Department of the Air Force. Billy Mitchell's legacy, the U.S. Air Force, came into being on September 18, 1947.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Mitchell: “Colonel” or “Brigadier General”?

No relationship exists between Billy Mitchell’s rank and the results of the famous courtmartial in 1925. Twice during his career, Mitchell served as a temporary brigadier general, but the highest Regular Army rank he wore was colonel, as of July 1, 1920.

The confusion over Mitchell’s grade has much of its origin in the U.S. Army’s promotion system, which provided for temporary promotion to higher rank to meet specific military needs, especially during wartime. The number of regular officers in the peacetime Army was simply too small to command and administer a force that by late 1918 was well over two million men strong. Temporary rank had to be authorized for the duration of the conflict. Ultimately, thousand of new officers were recruited from civilian life while thousands of professional officers served in grades two or three higher than those they had worn in peacetime. For most of World War I, Mitchell was actually a lieutenant colonel (as of May 15, 1917), but on October 14, 1918, he pinned on the single star of a brigadier general, a rank he held until after the end of hostilities.

Regular Army major general and brigadier general positions were strictly limited by statute. Promotion was by seniority and few officers ever attained flag rank. Wartime offered an opportunity to excel and the greatest award was promotion to one of the few Regular Army general slots. As noted in the text, Mason Patrick advocated that Mitchell be promoted to brigadier general, but there was simply too few positions available and these went to others who had also proven themselves in combat. The price of not getting a promotion to a higher grade, was a return the officer’s permanent grade. Again, as noted in the text, Mitchell’s rival, Benny Foulois, was in effect a brigadier general at the top of the ship’s boarding ramp when he returned from France and a major when he reached the bottom.

Following World War I, the National Defense Act of 1920, established the Air Service as a permanent combatant force. The act authorized the new organization one permanent major general position and three colonel positions, but did not provide for a permanent brigadier general slot. The War Department, however, had the option of authorizing temporary promotions to fill certain positions where additional rank was required. Mitchell became the Assistant Chief of the Air Service, and because of the position itself, he assumed the temporary rank of brigadier general on July 16, 1920. When the War Department allowed Mitchell’s appointment to this office to expire in 1925, he returned to his permanent rank of colonel.

The 1925 courtmartial suspended Mitchell from active duty for five years without pay. Subsequently, President Calvin Coolidge reduced the sentence to five years on half pay, but Mitchell elected to resign from the U.S. Army instead. He was never reduced in rank as a form of punishment.

In 1930, the 71st U.S. Congress passed a law that authorized all personnel who served honorably during wartime to “bear the official title and upon occasions of ceremony to wear the uniform of the highest grade held by them during their war service.” Thus, it became quite proper to refer to Billy Mitchell as a brigadier general, his highest rank during World War I.

Further confusion appears to have been caused by an effort to have the U.S. Congress posthumously promote Mitchell to the rank of major general in 1942. This effort failed to follow the normal process, which called for the War and Navy Departments to submit recommendations to the White House. The President would then submit the names to the Senate for approval. The House played no role in this process. The 1942 effort, however, began as a joint resolution approved by the Senate. This approach did require the approval of the House, which was not forthcoming. The favorable vote by the Senate may have been confused by some as being the final vote on confirmation, but it was not. Mitchell’s proper title remains brigadier general.

Appendix II

Mitchell: Medal of Honor Winner?

In the years following the famous 1925 courtmartial, many efforts have been made to have the U.S. Congress honor the legacy and memory of Billy Mitchell. Following World War II, Congress voted to give Billy Mitchell posthumous award of a special medal that honored his notable services to the United States. This medal, authorized on August 8, 1946, was presented to Mitchell's son, Billy, Jr., in 1948.

There is one big "however." The medal presented to Mitchell was not the "Medal of Honor," the highest decoration awarded military personnel for heroism in combat. Under U.S. law, this medal can only be awarded to an individual who "distinguishes himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty." And it can only be awarded for actions that take place in wartime.

Congress has many times in its history voted to award a special medal to honor victories or significant contributions to the nation. One such medal, for example, was given to Gen. George Washington for his military success at Boston against the British army in 1776. These special medals of honor are traditionally struck in silver or gold and are the noncombatant equivalent of the Medal of Honor. This was the type of medal awarded by Congress to Billy Mitchell.

The legislation authorizing the Mitchell medal requested that the President of the United States "cause a gold medal to be struck, with suitable emblems, devices and inscriptions, to be presented to the late William Mitchell, formerly a colonel in the United States Army, in recognition of his outstanding pioneer service and foresight in the field of American military aviation." The citation concluded that: "General Mitchell crusaded to achieve greater recognition of air-power as the major force on national defense."

Three other special medals of honor have been struck to honor Air Force flyers for heroic efforts in other than combat situations. These were presented to Col. Charles A. Lindbergh, Gen. Ira Eaker, and Brig. Gen. Charles "Chuck" Yeager.

Appendix III

Decorations and Awards

Spanish-American War:

Spanish War Service Medal (National Guard)

World War I:

Distinguished Service Cross — G.O. 120, War Dept, December 4, 1918

CITATION:

For repeated acts of extraordinary heroism in action at Noyon, France, March 26, 1918, near the Marne River, France, during July 1918, and in the St. Mihiel salient, France, September 12 to 16, 1918. For display of bravery above and beyond that required by his position as Chief of Air Service, First Army, American Expeditionary Forces, setting a personal example to the United States aviation by piloting his airplane over the battle lines since the entry of the United States in the war, some instances being a flight in a monoplane over the battle of Noyon on March 26, 1918, and the back areas, seeing and reporting upon the action of both air and ground troops, which led to a change in our aviation's tactical methods; a flight in a monoplane over the bridges which the Germans had laid across the Marne during July 1918 which led to the first definite reports of the location of these bridges and the subsequent attack upon the German troops by our air forces; daily reconnaissances over the lines during the battle of St. Mihiel salient, September 12 to 16, securing valuable information of the enemy troops in the air and on the ground, which led to the excellent combined action by the Allied air services and ground troops in this battle.

Distinguished Service Medal — G.O. 87, War Dept. July 5, 1919

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious and distinguished services. As Air Service commander, first of the advance and later of the First Corps, by his tireless energy and keen perception he performed duties of great importance with marked ability. Subsequently as commander, Air Service, of the First Army, and, in addition, after formation of the Second Army, as commander of Air Service of both armies, by his able direction of these vitally important services, he proved to be a potent factor in the successes achieved during the operations of the American armies.

World War I Victory Medal with clasps for

Cambrai

Somme Defensive

Meuse-Argonne

Champagne-Marne

Aisne-Marne
Oise-Marne
St. Mihiel
Defensive Sector

France:

Croix de Guerre with 5 Palms

Commandeur, de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur

Grand Officer de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur

Great Britain:

Companion of St. Michael and St. George

Italy:

Commander, Italian Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus

Grand Officer of the Order of the Crown of Italy

Medaglia Dell Guerra, 1915-1918