

Billy Mitchell and the Great War, Reconsidered

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America's involvement in the Great War lasted from April 1917 to November 1918, and from that conflict a number of soldiers emerged with lasting reputations, leaving their mark on American history. John J. Pershing, George C. Marshall, Charles P. Summerall, and William "Billy" Mitchell emerged as pages rather than footnotes in American history. Forever associated with the rise of American airpower, Billy Mitchell captured the imagination of the American public with his dramatic court martial in 1925. Known as a prophet, a man who predicted the power of air warfare and fought for an independent Air Service, Mitchell was born in Milwaukee in December 1879. His father was Senator John Landum Mitchell,

who was often cold and aloof toward his son William. Billy Mitchell was a good student at the many boarding schools he attended, and when the war with Spain broke out in 1898 he defied his senator-father, who had opposed the conflict, and joined the military.

Our contributor James J. Cooke, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Mississippi, is not only a prolific military historian, he is a retired brigadier general in the Mississippi National Guard and saw active service as recently as Operation Desert Storm. In 2002, his biography *Billy Mitchell* was published by Lynne Rienner Publishers. At our request he has rethought Mitchell's contributions to the birth of American airpower and presents some his fresh thinking in this article.

After the war Mitchell served in Cuba and then in the Philippines, making a very good impression on his superiors. His service as a signal officer in the Alaskan wilderness and in San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire marked him as an officer on the rise. Ordered to Washington to serve on the General Staff, he slowly became interested in the new section of the Signal Corps - the aviation section - and he took private flying lessons in 1916.



Mitchell in the Alaskan Wilderness

As an officer serving on the General Staff, Billy Mitchell could see the conflict in Europe from a special vantage point, and he felt that eventually the United States would be drawn into the war despite President Wilson's promise that the country would not be involved. He was correct in his assumptions, and a month before the U.S. declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917 Mitchell was dispatched to Paris as an observer with special emphasis on the development of the air arms of the British and the French. There was no better choice

than Billy Mitchell because he was a flyer, fluent in French, as well as a *bon vivant* who enjoyed Paris life. But all was not dinners at Maxim's or strolls along the Champs Elysees. Mitchell threw himself into his work and went to the front, actually flying with the French over the front. Within two months Mitchell was well aware of all aspects of the air war and was ready to be General Pershing's right hand air advisor. The British and French experience on the Western Front showed that the air arm was vital to ground success. Mitchell observed this and adopted what his European hosts showed him, passing it on to General Pershing when he arrived with his small staff in June 1917.

On 20 April 1917 Mitchell left Paris for French headquarters at Chalons and began his work. Billy Mitchell had always been a very literate officer, and he began to keep a detailed diary of his learning experiences. It is from this diary that one can see the evolution of Mitchell's thoughts, which would eventually have a great impact on the development of the U.S. Air Service in France and American airpower in the 20th Century. When Pershing began his 1916-1917 punitive expedition in Mexico he had one Aero Squadron and was impressed with the observation potential of the air arm, if it could be called that. When the U.S. went to war there was not one serviceable Aero Squadron which could be deployed to France. Mitchell realized that everything would have to be built from the ground up. It was a daunting task, and in the first days Mitchell spent a great deal of time dealing with air observation by aircraft and balloons. He understood that his role there was not just to learn about tactics, and he studied the logistics and the maintenance needs of

the Air Service. On 23 April he recorded that the pilot, the aircraft, and the ground crew functioned as one team. Each French pilot kept his own mechanics, and they in turn made the aircraft their personal machine, boasting that their pilot, their aircraft, and their crew was the best. This was morale and unit cohesion at its best, and it was never lost on Mitchell. The pilots and the crews had a certain *élan*, a romantic view of themselves, and this certainly appealed to Billy Mitchell.

Another area that came as a revelation to Billy Mitchell was the use of battlefield air photography. Mitchell's evaluation was very orthodox, seeing the value of immediate intelligence for the ground combat commanders. After visiting a French bombardment squadron, he commented in his diary that the squadron officers believed that they could hit deep targets, and that "... there would be nothing left of Germany in a short time." Not yet ready to accept the concept of strategic bombing, Mitchell remained skeptical and restricted his view of bombardment to a part of the immediate battlefield. Of course, his views would change dramatically after the Great War. He grasped very quickly the value of the balloon in observing of the enemy and directing indirect artillery fire. With real time communications artillery could rapidly shift fire from one target to the next. His service as a signal officer and his hands-on experiences in the Alaskan wilderness laying telegraph cable and in post-earthquake San Francisco served him well.

On 17 June Mitchell visited General Hugh Trenchard, at Royal Flying Corps headquarters and had a lengthy discussion with the general. Two areas which Mitchell later commented on were bombardment, a subject which he had fully explored with the

French, and the principle of mass. Long recognized as one of the principles of war, mass was applied to ground combat operations to bring as much force as possible at a single point. Mitchell came away from the meeting convinced that airpower was best used in mass to first dominate the air and then deliver a massive blow against the enemy both in close combat and against enemy supply lines, ammunition and supply dumps, and rail links. This belief would stay with Billy Mitchell, and in September 1918 he massed 1485 aircraft in support of the St. Mihiel campaign.

Mitchell met with General Pershing and briefed him on what he had learned from his meetings with the French and the British, and what he had to say was staggering indeed. The U.S. had an infant Air Service, but now was faced with a massive, really unexpected, expansion -- the creation of a command and control structure for bombardment, pursuit, observation, and balloon units. These newly created squadrons and companies called for trained pilots, ground crews, and a logistical system to support every aspect of air operations. Of paramount importance for Mitchell was Pershing's support for this expansion, and Mitchell got it when Black Jack Pershing agreed that there should be an Air Service that was separate from the Signal Corps. This was a high point for Mitchell, who was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and served as Pershing's Air Service chief. Coming out of this was an aviation board with Mitchell as the major experienced officer, and its recommendations were accepted by Pershing. General Pershing began to contract for aircraft, coordinate training needs, and establish the main AEF Air Service training area at Issoudun, France.

On 3 September 1917 Pershing appointed William L. Kenly, an old line army officer, as chief of the AEF's Air Service, which proved to be an unwise move. To sooth Mitchell's feelings he promoted him to the rank of full colonel before the age of 40! But there could be no question as to who was the real aviation expert and who was not. Mitchell was given command of the air in the Zone of Advance as Pershing's real warfighter. He never stopped preaching a gospel of mass and aggressive action in the air. To Mitchell the air arm should never be passive but should be in the air to attack and destroy enemy observation aircraft and then command the air over the front by defeating the German pursuit aircraft. Mitchell breathed aggressiveness and offensive operations into the Air Service.

Mitchell had processed a vast amount of material in a very short period of time, and his mind was racing in all directions. In a memo to General James Guthrie Harbord, General Pershing's excellent lieutenant, Mitchell outlined what needed to be done to

build the American Air Service. He then discussed his view of the air war, a position which he would never abandon. He divided the air arm into two distinct operational forces: the tactical and the strategic. They both would be part of the Air Service but would operate in different spheres. The tactical mission was clear - to support the ground battle with observation and pursuit planes and balloons. The strategic force would range deep into the enemy's rear area, striking those areas supporting German fighting forces. Mitchell's vision, however, extended the strategic force's power by hitting the enemy homeland. Bridges, rail yards, and supply centers would be worthy targets, and strategic air had to operate in mass. Mitchell told Harbord that he believed a strategic bombing campaign might well have a greater influence on the course of war than any other use of airpower. This was basically Mitchell the theoretician, but it would become vintage Mitchell in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1917 and 1918 Colonel Billy Mitchell had too much to do to press for any sort of strategic or deep strike campaign

Mitchell and His Gunner with His Spad XVI



against the German homeland. His ideas, however, would surface again, especially in 1921 when he met Giulio Douhet who had just published his landmark book *Il Dominio dell' Aria* [*Command of the Air*]. The value of strategic air warfare became gospel for Mitchell, but the seeds of his concepts were planted in 1917 and 1918.

Pershing had decided to move his headquarters from Paris to Chaumont, and Mitchell moved his staff and headquarters as well. On 18 August he formally requested suitable quarters for 20 officers and about 100 enlisted men. What he found was the Chateau de Chamarandes, which was a mile from Chaumont. There he established a meteorological station to support air activities. Billy Mitchell was never one to hide his talents or to use (some would argue overuse) his fine staff, but, despite his good experiences with the French and British air arms, his relationship with Pershing's staff soured. One main problem was his deteriorating relationship with General Kenly over the direction of the Air Service. Frankly, Kenly had little feel or knowledge of the air war, having come from the artillery. Pershing knew of Kenly's evenhanded approach to command and his ability to organize units under his command. What Kenly could not deal with was Mitchell's personality and Mitchell's drive. Kenly was also vehemently opposed to Mitchell's call for the Air Service to be an independent arm within the AEF. Mitchell would have been wise to point out that the Air Service would be a part of the Pershing orthodoxy of the rifleman as the key to victory and that AEF divisions would be part of a combined arms team. Billy Mitchell did indeed recognize the importance of assigning an aero squadron and a balloon unit to the

divisions, and air liaison officers would be a part of divisional, corps, and army level units.

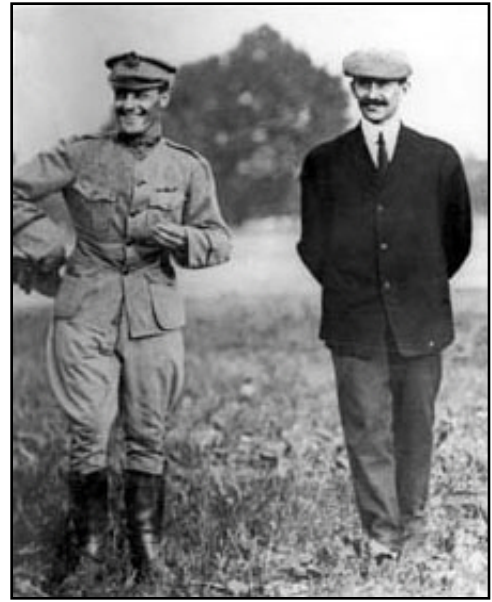
But, all was not rancor and dispute. Under Mitchell's guidance a large air depot was established at Colombey-les-Belles, less than 100 miles from the front. The depot began stockpiling repair parts and the serious training of those all-important ground crews. There was much to be done in a very short period of time. Training at Issoudun showed promise, but there appeared to be confusion in the ranks of the Air Service. Pershing, who was under great pressure to get the Americans into the fight, became displeased with what seemed to be a lack of coordination, command, and control in the Air Service. Word of Black Jack's displeasure reached Mitchell, and he believed that a change in the position of chief of the Air Service should see him as the new commander with the star of a brigadier general.

Mitchell was devastated when Pershing announced that Benjamin Foulois would be the new chief of the AEF's Air Service. Foulois was an old airman who had served with Black Jack during the Mexico operation in 1916-1917, and Pershing had been impressed with the potential of the 1st Aero Squadron, especially in the area of observation to support ground combat operations. It did not hurt that Foulois, who trained under Orville Wright in 1909 and earned his army pilot's wings in 1912, was a solid team player and supported the Pershing orthodoxy. The selection of Foulois greatly upset Mitchell, who reacted very badly. There would be bad blood between the two airmen. Mitchell was assigned to command the newly formed I Corps' aviation. Despite his grave

disappointment at not getting the position as chief, Mitchell worked hard to build the air arm of the corps. His newly trained aero squadrons began flying close to the front in what was known as a "quiet sector" where there was little combat action. Mitchell did have a realistic view of what the mission of the AEF was. He wrote, "The Air Service of an army is one of its offensive arms. Alone it can not bring about a decision. It therefore helps the other arms in their appointed mission."

There is complexity in dealing with Mitchell in the Great War. On one hand he was consistent in building an air arm from the ground up into a viable fighting force, while on the other his personality grated on other high-ranking, influential officers and interfered with his mission. His open hostility toward Foulois was obvious and alienated key officers like Generals Hugh Drum (operations) and Dennis Nolan (intelligence). Meanwhile, Mitchell's ideas were forming into an air doctrine. He instilled in his subordinates the principle of mass and immediate and aggressive counter-air operations -- in other words, gaining air superiority over the German air arm. Despite his conflicts, Mitchell was simply too valuable to relieve and send home.

Other problems began to surface with the Air Service. Foulois had great difficulty in coordinating air issues between the *Zone of Advance* and the *Line of Communications*. Supplies were slow in moving to the front, there was confusion at higher commands, and a great deal of time was lost when Foulois succeeded Kenly. It did not help that when the great German offensives began in early 1918 Washington slowed down the transportation of Air Service personnel to



Rival Benjamin Foulois with Wilbur Wright

France in favor of infantry and machine gun units. Pershing was becoming greatly distressed over the confusion in the Air Service and decided that a very firm hand was needed to bring order out of what now appeared to be a chaotic situation. On 29 May 1918 Pershing appointed Brigadier General Mason Patrick to become the chief of the American Air Service. Patrick's appointment came as a surprise to everyone because he had no experience with air operations and had never flown in an aircraft. Patrick had been a classmate of Pershing at West Point and spent his career as an engineering officer. Patrick kept Foulois on as his assistant. Shortly afterward, on 3 June Congress passed an Air Service act which created the service as a branch of the army rather than air as a component of the Army Signal Corps. Mitchell and his airmen could now wear the distinctive insignia of the Air Service, and those officers on duty with the Air Service were transferred to the service with no massive bureaucratic paperwork. For Billy Mitchell this was another step in creating an independent air force.

Mason Patrick came to the Air Service with a reputation of being an excellent, no-nonsense officer, and he had the full support of Black Jack Pershing. [See Prof. Cooke's profile of Patrick on page 16.] He was quick to see that Mitchell was a first-rate officer with a quick mind and an organizational ability. While the Mitchell-Foulois feud continued, Patrick looked to Billy Mitchell for complicated combat tasks. By 25 July Mitchell had devised an Air Service command and control chart which would be used until the end of the war. One of the critical areas settled was a coherent chain of command, who reported to whom, who issued orders, and what was contained within Air Service assets. Mitchell's 25 July organization tied together the observation, pursuit, and bombardment squadrons with the air depots and the ancillary units such as air photography and air intelligence companies. The balloon companies, so vital to observation and artillery, came under the organization. As the U.S. Air Service took shape, Mitchell was able to move more and more air squadrons to the Toul area for practical experience. When Foulois was moved to chief of the Air Service, 1st U.S. Army, Mitchell became 1st Air Brigade commander. He was the under watchful eyes of Patrick and key I Corps commander, Hunter Liggett. Despite the work Mitchell had accomplished to give form and structure to the Air Service he would not yet be promoted to the rank of brigadier general.

Patrick's leadership abilities came into play, and he was content to leave direction of training, coordination with the French and British, and logistics to Foulois and actual combat operations to Mitchell. By the summer of 1918, the press, then under Pershing's strict censorship policies, was looking for stories for their newspapers.

They hit on the Air Service as a source of "human interest" stories. The "intrepid airmen" became knights of the air with flowing white scarves, the idols of French womanhood, the daring warrior above the mud and blood of the trenches. Mitchell, who by now sported a British-style walking stick and a beautifully tailored uniform, was pictured as the boyish bon vivant, the stuff that national heroes were made of. Of course, the press exaggerated the picture and reported none of dangers or miseries of the airmen who had no parachutes, who could be roasted alive in a flaming plane, or suffered the serious intestinal distress from the castor oil that lubricated temperamental engines and blew back into the cockpit. Billy Mitchell loved it and did nothing to dissuade the press from idolizing his "dashing knights."

The Mitchell-Foulois feud had grown into a festering sore for the AEF, and something had to be done because the AEF was planning for its first major offensive operation in September 1918. On 25 August General Foulois asked to step down from his post and that Mitchell be appointed as the chief of the Air Service at 1st Army headquarters. The operation against the St. Mihiel Salient had to be successful if the American army could ever hope to be seen as the equal to the British and French. On 10 August Pershing issued the order to begin planning for the offensive. No American general had ever faced the daunting task of planning for an attack that used aircraft, tanks, and wire communication, and it was planning that Billy Mitchell could do well.

There is not a question of Col. Mitchell's extraordinary personal magnetism and of his rather unusual ability, but... he blows in, puts everything in a stew, and then leaves [us] to straighten it out and get things running again.

Capt. Philip Roosevelt, First Pursuit Group