

Major General Mason Mathews Patrick

General Mason Patrick was one of the most influential figures in the development of American airpower, and he and his contributions are often overlooked. It was Patrick's steady hand and his determination that brought about the establishment of the United States Army Air Corps in July 1926. He was not given to flashy speeches nor did he have the personality to attract the press or adulation of the public. Patrick was an unlikely airman who became one of the fathers of the modern U.S. Air Force.



Patrick was born in West Virginia in December 1863. His father was a surgeon with the Confederate Army. In 1882 Patrick entered West Point, graduating as an engineer officer in 1886. One of his classmates and friends was John J. Pershing, and their friendship would have a great effect on the course of Patrick's military career. From 1892 to 1895 Patrick taught engineering at his alma mater, and from 1897 to 1901 he was involved with improvements along the Mississippi river. In 1916 Patrick served under Pershing during the Mexico campaign, and when Pershing went to France in 1917 he saw to it that Patrick served in the AEF as Chief Engineer, Line of Communication. What was very clear was that Brigadier General Patrick was a first-rate organizer and an excellent manager of the men serving under him. Those two traits plus his loyalty to Pershing made him a prime candidate for further assignment and promotion. One of the areas of the AEF that cried out for a man of Patrick's abilities was the U.S. Air Service, where rivalries and personalities caused

tension and confusion. If the AEF was to become a modern, respected fighting force the problems with the Air Service had to be resolved. In 1917 Patrick, in charge of training the AEF's engineers, wrote in his diary, "My job is staggering me" He successfully completed this task, however; and this was not lost on Pershing.

Patrick inherited a mess because the two top airpower advocates, Benjamin Foulois and Billy Mitchell, were at odds with each other. What Patrick eventually did was to allow Mitchell to oversee the tactical operations of the Air Service and to make Foulois assistant chief of staff of the Air Service under Patrick. Patrick saw in Mitchell a very good combat leader who had a fine staff that could plan operations in detail. Mason Patrick also ran interference for the emerging Air Service with Pershing, who never really liked distinctive insignia on aircraft or on pilots' uniforms, and Black Jack certainly did not like the cavalier attitudes that airmen had regarding regulation uniforms. Being an old soldier with much time with troops, Patrick recognized that morale and unit cohesion were vital to the building of such a new combat force, and he tended to overlook the casual dress of his men except when they were off duty and in the local cafes and bars, where he wanted them in proper uniform. Patrick's approach paid off during the St. Mihiel operation when Mitchell was able to put 1481 aircraft into the fight. The Air Service also served the AEF well during the Meuse-Argonne offensive despite very bad weather conditions.

In 1919 Patrick returned to the United States as an engineer officer. He turned over the direction of the Air Service to Major General Charles T. Menoher. Menoher had been a very successful commander of the 42nd "Rainbow" Division from 1917 to 1918, but he had no experience with aviation, and very quickly his relationship with Billy Mitchell, his director of military aeronautics and his operations officer, soured and became an open conflict. Pershing, now Chief of Staff of the Army, faced an old problem--how to bring order out of chaos and establish some stability in the air arm. He brought back Patrick as the Chief of the Air Service in 1921.

Patrick recognized very quickly that someone without wings on his chest could never be totally respected by airmen who had flown into mortal combat over the front during the Great War. At age 58 Patrick went to Bolling Field and earned his pilot's wings. During his tenure as chief he established research and experimental facilities at Wright Field, Ohio and a large training facility near San Antonio, Texas. Patrick served on numerous boards and was a constant visitor to Capitol Hill, arguing for the Air Service. His thoughts evolved, and he became a champion of an independent Air Service. While one associates this with Billy Mitchell, it was actually Patrick, with his calm manner and judicious words, who had more of an impact on those who could actually effect change. In 1926 he oversaw a reorganization for the Air Service, which became the Air Corps. Perhaps the most personally distressing event of his tenure was the famed court martial of Billy Mitchell in 1925. From the official transcripts of the trial one sees Patrick trying to put the best possible light on Mitchell's actions, but to no avail, as Mitchell was found guilty.