

Brigadier General William Billy Mitchell (1879-1936)

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"With us air people, the future of our nation is indissolubly bound up in the development of air power."

- Brigadier General William
Billy Mitchell¹

INTRODUCTION

Brigadier General William Billy Mitchell was a man who saw the future of air power. A determined and intelligent soldier, he pushed authorities to the limits in order to prove his point. His 'radical' ideas included using fighter planes, instead of battle ships, and soldiers transported by air and not just through land.

EARLY LIFE

William Billy Mitchell was born on 29th December 1879, in Nice, France to John Lendrum Mitchell, a wealthy Wisconsin senator and Harriet Michelle.² Mitchell was the eldest of his nine other siblings and came from a distinguished family. His grandfather Alexander Mitchell, a Scotsman, was the wealthiest

person in Wisconsin at his time and established what became the Milwaukee Road railroad and the Marine Bank of Wisconsin. Mitchell Park and the shopping precinct of Mitchell Street were named in honor of Alexander.

Mitchell and his siblings learned German, Italian and Spanish. He also spoke French as fluently as English.

Mitchell's father was elected to Congress in 1891 and to the Senate in 1893. Important guests were often invited to the Mitchell home and, the children were encouraged to interact and converse with their parents' guests. Mitchell was allowed at the dinner table with important guests, and always found a way to participate in the conversations.³

Mitchell graduated from Columbian College of George Washington University in 1898.

CAREER AND INTEREST IN AVIATION

In May 1898, Mitchell enlisted at age of 18 in the Army as a

private in Company M of the 1st Wisconsin Infantry Regiment when the Spanish-American War broke out. He was commissioned and served in the Army Signal Corps in Cuba, the Philippines and Alaska before becoming interested in aviation.⁴

Mitchell was sent to Alaska in 1901 where he successfully built telegraph lines in remote areas. During this posting, he began studying Otto Lilienthal's glider experiments. This reading, combined with further research, led him to conclude in 1906 that future conflicts would be fought in the air.⁵

In March 1912, Mitchell was assigned to the Army General Staff in Washington in 1912 as a captain. At the age of 32, he was the youngest out of the 21 officers selected to serve the General Staff.

In 1913, Mitchell was sent to the Army Staff College and became the only Signal Corps Officer on the Army General Staff.⁶ As aviation was assigned to the Signal Corps, Mitchell was well placed to further develop his interest.⁷ He was chosen as temporary head of the Aviation Section, U.S. Signal Corps, predecessor of the modern United States (US) Air Force.

In 1916, Mitchell was made Deputy Commander of the Aviation Section, Signal Corps. The US Army felt that Mitchell, at the age of 38, was too old for flying lessons. Hence, he was forced to seek private instruction at the Curtiss Aviation School in Newport News where he managed to pick up this skill quickly.⁸

WORLD WAR I

On 6th April, 1917, the US declared war on Germany and Mitchell, by then a Lieutenant Colonel, headed towards France as an observer. He immediately went to Paris and set up an office. In Paris, he learned how to develop aerial combat strategies and planned large-scale air operations when working closely with the Royal Flying Corps' General Sir Hugh Trenchard.

In two weeks, he became the first American officer to fly over the lines when he rode with a French pilot. Mitchell quickly earned a reputation as a daring and tireless leader. He was promoted to Brigadier General and given command of all American air units in General John J. Pershing's American Expeditionary Force. Slowly, more American pilots arrived and they piloted French planes.

On Sunday, 14th April, 1918, a year after the US entered the war, Mitchell declared that America had finally put its first squadron into combat. His flair for combat leadership was subsequently proven at the Battle of Saint-Mihiel when he co-ordinated a force of 1,481 British, French and Italian planes, to support American ground forces. During his time in France, Mitchell proved a highly effective commander, but his aggressive approach and unwillingness to operate in the chain of command made him numerous enemies.

For his performance in World War One (WWI), Mitchell received several awards which includes; the Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, the World War I Victory Medal with eight campaign clasps and several foreign decorations.

POST WORLD WAR I

Mitchell returned to the US as a hero in 1919 and was appointed Assistant Chief of the US Army Air Service. He was appalled at how quickly the organisation he had helped to build in war had disintegrated in peacetime.

AIR ADVOCATE

Mitchell was supposed to have the post-war assignment of Director of Air Service after the leadership he portrayed in WWI.

However, Major General Charles T. Menoher, an artilleryman who had commanded the 42nd 'Rainbow' Division in France, was appointed Director instead, on the recommendation of his classmate General Pershing, to maintain operational control of aviation by the ground forces.¹⁰ This appointment surprised many who felt that Mitchell was more suited for that position.

Mitchell was able to retain his wartime rank of Brigadier General. A relentless advocate for aviation, he encouraged US Army Air Force pilots to challenge records, as well as promoted races, and ordered aircraft to aid in fighting forest fires. Convinced that air power would become the driving force of war in the future, he pressed for the creation of an independent Air Force.

However, Mitchell the war hero soon became known as Mitchell the Agitator. Mitchell's vocal support of air power brought him into conflict with the US Navy as he felt that the importance of an Air Force would make Navies' battleships increasingly obsolete. He tried to prove that airplanes could actually accomplish the things he had said. He then proposed a number of daring innovations for the Air Service that stunned the non-flying

Army generals—a special corps of mechanics, troop-carrying aircraft, a civilian pilot pool for wartime availability, long-range bombers capable of flying the Atlantic and armor-piercing bombs. Convinced that bombers could sink battleships, he argued that aviation should be the US's first line of defence. He encouraged the development of bombsight, ski-equipped aircraft, engine superchargers, aerial torpedoes and the concept of Airborne, an idea that allowed troops to parachute from airplanes to land in the midst of a battlefield. He ordered the establishment of aerial forest-fire and border patrols and followed that with a mass flight to Alaska, a transcontinental air race and a flight around the perimeter of the US. He also encouraged Army pilots to set speed, endurance and altitude records at all cost in order to keep aviation in the news.

With each success, Mitchell became more determined that the nation's money should be spent on aircraft and not on expensive battleships. He stepped on the egos of Army generals and Navy admirals with his fiery way of words and boasted that Army planes could sink any battleship afloat under any conditions of war. Dynamic and impulsive, Mitchell sought out the American press and announced that if he were given permission to bomb captured

German battleships, he would be able to prove his assertions.

Among those he alienated was Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Failing to achieve his goals, Mitchell became increasingly outspoken and attacked his superiors in the US Army, as well as the leadership of the US Navy and White House for failing to understand the importance of military aviation.

PROJECT B

In February 1921, Mitchell was anxious to test his theories of destruction of ships by aerial bombing. Reluctantly, both Secretary of War, Newton Baker and Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels agreed to a series of joint Army-Navy exercises to be held that summer in which captured ships could be used as targets. Mitchell believed that he could succeed in 'wartime conditions', and that a thousand bombers could be built for the price of one battleship, making aviation a more economical defence force.¹¹

Dubbed Project B, the exercises were moved forward to June and July 1921 under a set of rules of engagement that greatly favored the survivability of the ships. In the early tests, Mitchell's aircraft sank a captured German

destroyer and light cruiser. From 20th – 21st July, they attacked the German battleship *Ostfriesland*.¹² However, Mitchell violated the rules of engagement by sinking the battleship. In addition, the circumstances of the exercises were not under 'wartime conditions' as all of the target vessels were stationary and effectively defenseless at that point of time.

FALL FROM POWER

Mitchell repeated his success later that year by sinking the retired battleship USS *Alabama* in September. The tests provoked President Warren Harding who wished to avoid any show of naval weakness immediately prior to the Washington Naval Conference. However, the sinking of the retired battleship USS *Alabama* did lead to increased funding for military aviation.

Mitchell continued to criticise his superiors regarding aviation policy. In 1924, the commander of the Air Service, Major General Mason Patrick, sent him on a tour of Asia and the Far East to remove him from the limelight. During this tour, Mitchell foresaw a future war with Japan and predicted an aerial attack on Pearl Harbor. That fall, he again blasted the Army and Navy leadership, this time to the Lampert Committee. The following

March, his term of Assistant Chief ended and he was exiled to San Antonio, Texas with the rank of Colonel, to oversee air operations.

COURT MARTIAL

Later that year, following the loss of the US Navy airship USS *Shenandoah*, Mitchell issued a statement accusing the military's senior leadership of 'almost treasonable administration of the national defense' and incompetence. As a result of these statements, he was brought up on court-martial charges for insubordination at the direction of President Calvin Coolidge. Beginning that November, the court-martial saw Mitchell receive broad public support and notable aviation officers such as Eddie Rickenbacker, Henry Arnold and Carl Spaatz testifying on his behalf.¹³

On 17th December, 1925, Mitchell was found guilty and sentenced to a five-year suspension from active duty and loss of pay. The youngest of the twelve judges, Major General Douglas MacArthur, called serving on the panel 'distasteful', and voted not guilty stating that an officer should not be "silenced for being at variance with his superiors in rank and with accepted doctrine."¹⁴ Rather than accept the punishment, Mitchell resigned on 1st February, 1926.

LATER LIFE

Mitchell wrote more than 60 articles, several newspaper series and five books, never deviating from his appeal for public understanding of the promise and the potential of air power. He made his last public appearance on 11th February, 1935, when he addressed the House Military Affairs Committee.

Weakened by his struggle, the old campaigner died in a New York hospital on 19th February, 1936, at the age of 56. He had elected to be buried in Milwaukee, his hometown, where he enlisted in 1898, rather than at Arlington National Cemetery.

CONCLUSION

Mitchell not only foresaw that an Air Force was essential for national survival, he also educated the public and its leaders on the role that air power would eventually play in national defence. For his foresight and willingness to sacrifice his career for his beliefs, the US owes this visionary man a debt of gratitude it can never repay. Many wondered if he was successful in becoming the Chief of Air Force at the earliest stage, what other plans or theories he could have implemented. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Brainy Quote. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/b/billy_mitchell.html
2. The United States Senate is a legislative chamber in the bicameral legislature of the United States, and together with the House of Representatives makes up the U.S. Congress.

Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Senate
3. Biography. <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/billy-mitchell>
4. Military Aviation: Brigadier General Billy Mitchell. <http://www.historynet.com/william-billy-mitchell-an-air-power-visionary.htm>
5. Ibid.
6. Billy Mitchell, Crusader for Air Power, Alfred F. Hurley. 17.
7. Ibid.
8. Military Aviation: Brigadier General Billy Mitchell. <http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/airforce/p/Military-Aviation-Brigadier-General-Billy-Mitchell.htm>.
9. Colonel Phillip S. Meilinger, USAF. Maxwell AFB. American Airpower Biography: Billy Mitchell. <http://www.au.af.mil/au/404.asp>.
10. Major General Charles T. Menoher. Biography. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_T._Menoher.

Hakim, Joy (1995). *A History of Us: War, Peace and all that Jazz*. New York: Oxford University Press.
11. Project B. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Mitchell#Project_B:_Anti-ship_bombing_demonstration
12. General William "Billy" Mitchell and the Sinking of the Ostfriesland: A Consideration. <http://blog.nasm.si.edu/aviation/general-william-%E2%80%9Cbilly%E2%80%9D-mitchell-and-the-sinking-of-the-ostfriesland-a-consideration/>
13. Eddie Rickenbacker an American fighter ace in World War I and Medal of Honor recipient. With 26 aerial victories, he was America's most successful fighter ace in the war. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Rickenbacker

Henry Harley "Hap" Arnold was an American general officer holding the grades of General of the Army and General of the Air Force. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_H._Arnold

Carl Andrew "Tooe" Spaatz was an American World War II general. As commander of Strategic Air Forces in Europe in 1944, he successfully pressed for the bombing of the enemy's oil production facilities as a priority over other targets. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Andrew_Spaatz
14. MacArthur 1964, 85.