

He was more complicated than perceived by either his admirers or his detractors.

The Real Billy Mitchell

By Rebecca Grant

WHICH Billy Mitchell was the real Billy Mitchell? Was it the firebrand who advocated strategic bombing and predicted in 1925 that, in the next war, “air forces will strike immediately at the enemy’s manufacturing and food centers, railways, bridges, canals, and harbors”? Or was it the experienced World War I air commander who authorized large numbers of ground attack and interdiction sorties and wrote, “Only by the combined work of all our arms will our full power be developed”?

The two Mitchells are indeed hard to reconcile. Mitchell’s career as an aviator lasted just 10 years, from flying lessons in 1916 until his resignation from the Army in 1926. He spent the post-resignation decade writing on aviation and other subjects, but he died in 1936, long before the great World War II test of airpower. He thus never had an opportunity to revise or expand his views. His record and writings produce many different images of the man—each one vivid.

One of the strongest negative images of Mitchell comes from the annals of naval aviation, where Mitchell is still regarded as a minor demon. This is perplexing. True, Mitchell did once refer to the aircraft carrier as “a snare and a delusion.” At the same time, some naval historians credit Mitchell with causing such a commotion about airpower that it forced Navy leaders in 1921 to establish the Bureau of Aeronautics. This was the cradle of naval aviation developments under Rear Adm. William A. Moffett.

Even Mitchell’s famous battleship bombing tests turned out to be helpful to naval aviation. Only days after Mitchell’s aviators sank the German battleship *Ostfriesland* off the Virginia Capes in 1921, Congress funded



Mitchell was a bold advocate for airpower. In commanding air forces from several nations in 1918 and through later experiments and demonstrations, he laid the foundation for US airpower today.

the first aircraft carrier. Naval aviators, however, never gave him any credit for this.

Conflicts between Mitchell and Moffett formed a true sore point that has lingered for decades. After the famous crash of the Navy airship *Shenandoah* on Sept. 3, 1925, Mitchell issued a 6,000-word statement that included this: “All aviation policies, schemes and systems are dictated by the nonflying officers of the Army and Navy who know practically nothing about it. The lives of airmen are being used merely as pawns in their hands.” The statement, as he predicted, brought him a court-martial.

“That SOB ...”

An aide found Moffett, who was in San Francisco, “pacing the floor” over Mitchell’s affront. To the aide, Moffett shouted, “Did you see what Billy Mitchell said? That son of a bitch is

riding over the Navy’s dead to further his own interests. I’m going back to Washington and put a stop to this!” Two days after the disaster, Moffett publicly denounced Mitchell, and soon the court-martial was on.

Moffett’s aide at that time was Jocko Clark, then a Navy lieutenant but destined to become a renowned World War II carrier admiral in the Pacific. Clark’s own encounters with Mitchell had an interesting twist. Four years after the *Shenandoah* incident, Mitchell and Clark traveled together to Langley, Va., for meetings of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. As they came down from Washington, D.C., on a night steamer, Clark “listened to Mitchell by the hour, getting to know him quite well.” Said Clark: “His visions of aviation in the future were impressive. I had to admire him for his foresight, yet I realized that he was years ahead of his time.”

Clark's evenhanded treatment of Mitchell was—and is—unusual. It was the negative image that stuck. Intense hostility was still on display in 1963, almost 40 years after the court-martial, when naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison charged that “propaganda by Brigadier General William Mitchell” was one of the major factors that “kept the Navy weak” before World War II. Morison ridiculed Mitchell for prophesying around the clock. He dismissed the *Ostfriesland* experiments as “some practice sinkings of moored, unarmed, and defenseless naval hulks.”

In 1991, Nathan Miller's short study, “The Naval Air War 1939–45,” carved up Mitchell on the last page for contending that “superior airpower will dominate all sea areas when they act from land bases.” Mitchell was hard to forget or forgive.

In the early Army Air Corps, Mitchell enjoyed a much more positive reputation, of course. However, he eventually lost favor among airmen, too. Many harsh reappraisals of the effectiveness of World War II strategic bombing tended to point an accusatory finger at Mitchell. He was blamed for engendering a bomber-only approach to air war, even though he had argued for the use of pursuit aircraft and bombers in combination.

Not His Own Ideas?

Others questioned the originality of Mitchell's thought. These revisionists postulated that Mitchell had just absorbed his ideas on airpower from others such as Brig. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, the chief of American Expeditionary Force's Air Service in France in 1918, and Col. Thomas DeWitt Milling, chief of Air Service, First Army, in France.

Then came silence. In Col. John Warden's much-lauded 1988 book, *The Air Campaign*, Mitchell was not once mentioned, not even in the bibliography. Since Warden went over the concepts of air superiority and vital centers in detail, the omission suggested that Mitchell's World War I experiences in these areas had vanished from the scene as far as leading theorists within the Air Force were concerned. Several books on the Gulf War gave a nod to Mitchell for advocating strategic attack as a war-winning technique, but the vital-centers thesis captured only a



After the *Ostfriesland*, Mitchell's bombardiers conducted a demonstration in September hitting the battleship *Alabama* with phosphorus (as shown here), tear gas, and other bombs.

fragment of Mitchell's experience with employing airpower.

Mitchell's reputation hit rock bottom in 1994 with the publication by RAND of Carl Builder's book, *The Icarus Syndrome*. In Builder's eyes, Mitchell was so influenced by Giulio Douhet, the European airpower theorist, and British Maj. Gen. Hugh Trenchard, commander of the Royal Flying Corps, that he was more of “an advocate and promoter of airpower” than a “theorist or institution builder.” Mitchell was a “flaming evangelist” obsessed with airplanes and flying, whose legacy of seeing airmen as a breed apart reverberated “with devastating effects” for the Air Force down to the current day.

In 1997, a new collection of Mitchell's sayings emerged in print. It gave a more balanced view of his *bons mots* and remarked on the freshness and impact of what he had to say about airpower. Still, his reputation among airmen seemed to have come to rest on what he preached, not what he practiced. The net result was that Mitchell was seldom appreciated for what he did best: exercising professional and effective command of airpower.

The real Billy Mitchell—the one who made the most sense—was Mitchell the warrior. A much more detailed view of Mitchell comes through in his experiences commanding airpower in World War I, and this side illuminates all that he did later.

A good portrait of Mitchell emerges from accounts of his first visit to

Trenchard's headquarters. Trenchard had just spent two years figuring out how to employ airpower and deal with some difficult ground commanders. British fliers knew he was coming but Mitchell arrived at an inconvenient moment and Trenchard's aide, Maurice Baring, politely tried to reschedule.

At that moment, Trenchard appeared and asked Mitchell what he wanted.

“I'd like to see your equipment, your stores, and the way you arrange your system of supply,” Mitchell began. “Also, I need to know all you can tell me about operations, because we will be joining you in these before long.”

Fortunately, the hot-tempered Trenchard was disarmed by Mitchell's “good-natured impudence” and let the American shadow him for three days. Mitchell had a “deep respect” for Trenchard. Trenchard, for his part, called Mitchell “a man after my own heart” and told Baring that “if he can only break his habit of trying to convert opponents by killing them, he'll go far.”

With Trenchard, Mitchell showed his practical side and his desire to make the maximum impact with air forces. Trenchard taught Mitchell that the airplane was, above all, a weapon of attack to be concentrated in a vigorous offensive to control the air, reaching “just as far into the enemy country as possible.” First came air superiority. Afterward, artillery co-

operation, reconnaissance, and even ground attack and long-range bombing could follow. Airpower had to be under a unified command.

Mitchell was the perfect student. He was not only eager to learn but was also brilliant in applying Trenchard's guidance to the needs of Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing and the AEF. It was here that he made his first, and greatest, contributions. The essentially static Western Front of 1914–17 had changed by 1918, becoming more fluid. In what Pershing called "open warfare," aviation was suddenly valuable. Commanders increasingly depended on air reconnaissance for rapid updates and comprehensive information about a developing battle. They also needed air superiority to keep the enemy's aircraft away from their troops. Air could also go after enemy soldiers trying to reinforce their lines or cover a retreat.

Close and Deep

Mitchell picked up on these lessons on how air operations could help control the battle by operating both close and deep, or in his vernacular, producing both "tactical" and "strategical" effects.

Tactical aviation took place within the range of field artillery. Mitchell defined its primary function as ensuring "observation for the fire and control of our own artillery." "This kind of air work has been done now for three years and is well understood," said Mitchell.

Strategical aviation was "air attack of enemy material of all kinds behind his lines," including enemy aircraft, air depots, and air organization. Factories, lines of communication, and personnel were also strategical. As a rough guide, targets located 25,000 yards or more from the line—approximately the reach of most long-range artillery—were strategical targets.

As Mitchell explained, strategical aviation would "have an independent mission very much as independent cavalry used to have, as distinguished from divisional cavalry."

Neither tactical nor strategical air operations could progress too far without air superiority, and for Mitchell it was the top priority. In fact, Mitchell noted, he had French, British, and Italian forces chopped to him for the 1918 Battle of St. Mihiel to have "a preponderance in the air for at least two days before the Germans could concentrate." His grasp of the operational level of war gave airpower several roles in the overall campaign.

Mitchell also had to work with Army ground commanders and sometimes prod them to see the battle as airmen saw it. He had a lot to say about armies and navies after the war, but in France, he was an able air component commander who made real contributions to the joint effort.

Mitchell could grasp and analyze the whole of the campaign, just as a ground forces general would do. At

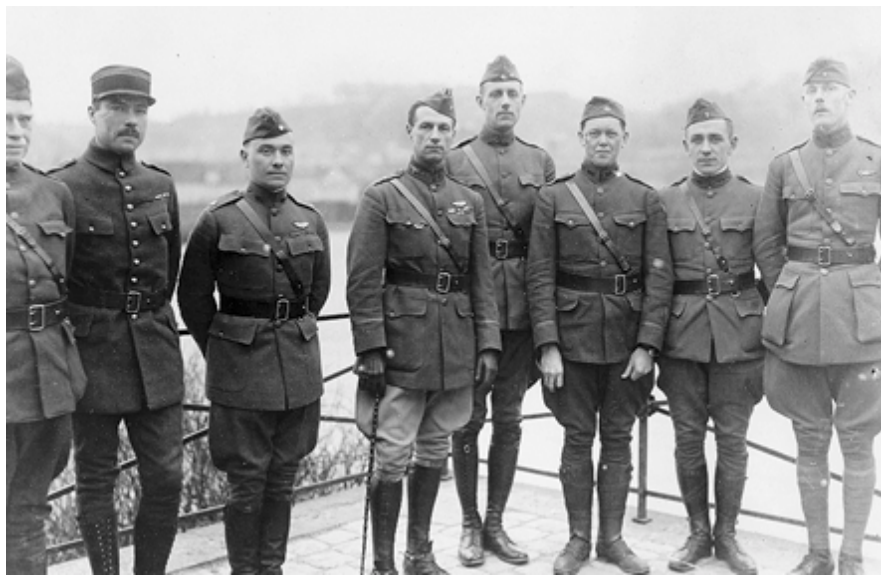
Soissons in July 1918, he flew over the lines and dashed back to the headquarters of Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the allied commander in France. "If we could get well to the rear of the enemy with our air forces and have tanks jump on him in front, we would come pretty near to destroying the German army," Mitchell reported.

The Smile on Jack's Face

In his World War I memoirs, Mitchell told of attending Pershing's staff meeting just before the start of the battle at St. Mihiel. Army engineers wanted to delay the attack because of rain. Mitchell interjected that he had just been over the lines and saw enemy troops starting to evacuate the salient. According to Mitchell, "Pershing smiled and ordered the attack."

Pershing rewarded Mitchell with a big role for the Air Service. In preparation for St. Mihiel, Mitchell said, Pershing helped them "in every way" and had much for the "air people" to do. Pershing's official orders for the operation proved it: "The Army pursuit aviation will defend the Army front from hostile air attack, protect its own observation aviation, and hold itself in readiness to attack troops on the ground in the immediate vicinity of our front." This was a new and comprehensive air doctrine, tested by Trenchard, to be sure, but never combined with such a concentration of air in the way Mitchell did it for Pershing.

Historian Walter Boyne called St. Mihiel Mitchell's "signature note." As Mitchell said, it was "the first time in history in which an air force, cooperating with an army, was to act according to a broad strategical plan which contemplated not only facilitating the advance of the ground troops but spreading fear and consternation into the enemy's line of communications, his replacement system, and the cities behind them which supplied our foe with the sinews of war." Subsequent operations used the same tactics. Ten days later, at Argonne, the American Army had under its control more than 800 airplanes, which kept down the German aircraft during the initial stages of the battle and also rendered valuable service in bombing sensitive points and in securing information.



Mitchell (at center, with walking stick) and his staff pose at Koblenz, Germany, in January 1919. His World War I experiences, he said, had "conclusively shown that aviation was a dominant element in the making of war."

Mitchell's command of airpower forces during 1918 was so clear that his basic concepts could be seen in air employment in combined operations for the rest of the 20th century. He wrote of the German efforts to retreat from St. Mihiel: "Our air force, by attacking their transportation trains, railroads, and columns on the roads, piled them up with debris so that it was impossible for many of their troops to get away quickly, resulting in their capture by our infantry." Gen. Omar N. Bradley at the Falaise pocket in 1944 or Lt. Gen. Frederick M. Franks Jr., VII Corps commander, in the southern Iraqi desert in 1991 could have said the same thing.

1919 Offensives

To Mitchell, "the European War was only the kindergarten of aviation." He thought the next war could be devastating. The plans for the 1919 offensives may have loomed large in Mitchell's mind. In that year, the allies were to have mounted a major air offensive and carried it deep into Germany, using poison gas and incendiary weapons to decimate the opponent. Mitchell and others naturally took the plans as a jumping-off point for future war scenarios. In their view, airpower was a necessity, not a luxury. A strong, independent air force would be the major player from the start. If the air force withered, then when the next war came, "we would start out again by making terrible mistakes and perhaps be defeated before we began."

All of these influences produced in Mitchell a core belief: Development of airpower "must be based on the grand hypothesis that future contests will depend primarily on the amount of airpower that a nation could produce and apply." To back it up, he touched on his wartime experience, writing that the war had "conclusively shown that aviation was a dominant element in the making of war even in the comparatively small way in which it was used by the armies in Europe." His grand hypothesis committed Mitchell to do all he could to build up the efficiency of the air service. American airmen might get involved in a European war or they might be called to defend their own shores. If so, airmen needed to learn how to bomb ships.



Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick, Chief of Air Service, is greeted at Bolling Field, D.C., in 1923 by Mitchell (right), his second in command. Mitchell criticized the Air Service's state of preparedness and equipment and was sent to the hinterlands.

The coast defense problem showed Mitchell as a man who reveled in trying out new tactics and cared a great deal about how to build and run an air force.

His most famous set of experiments, of course, came with the ship bombing trials in the summer of 1921. Mitchell's interest in bombing ships probably dated back to his relationship with Trenchard, who had told Mitchell that, eventually, airpower would be greater than sea power and filled him in on the struggles with British naval aviators over how to defend the English Channel against German bombers.

In February 1920, Mitchell completed an attack plan for defense against an enemy fleet, using aircraft and dirigibles. He told his boss, "We must at all costs obtain the battleship to attack and the necessary bombs, planes, and so on to make the test a thorough and complete one."

Mitchell was a hands-on leader. He pulled together aircraft from bases around the US, set up rigorous practice schedules, and supervised every detail, down to the manufacturing of special 2,000-pound "monster bombs." Navy flying boats first sank a German submarine, then the Air Service sank a destroyer. Mitchell orchestrated every round, often directing operations from his command biplane *Osprey* while airborne over the scene.

Mitchell favored three-wave at-

tacks of pursuit aircraft, light bombers, and finally, heavy bombers. Soon, his forces at Langley were ready to go after the heavily armored *Ostfriesland*. A flight of aircraft with 600-pound bombs scored hits on the ship the first day before a Navy control vessel halted the test due to weather. The next day, with *Ostfriesland* listing and taking on water, bombers hit it with 1,100-pound bombs, then returning in the early afternoon with 2,000-pound bombs, sent it to the bottom.

Pushing the Limits

The true highlights of Mitchell's air service career after 1919 were his experiments and tests. These ranged from setting world speed records and trying out long-distance air routes to simulating bombing attacks on US cities and leading expeditionary deployments to places like Bangor, Maine. Mitchell has been much criticized for not bowing to the limits of technology. His goal was to push those limits, and he did it audaciously.

The final image of Mitchell is the most contradictory one. In his book *Winged Defense*, Mitchell wrote that "airpower holds out the hope to the nations that, in the future, air battles taking place miles away from the frontiers will be so decisive and of such far-reaching effect that the nation losing them will be willing to capitulate without resorting to a further contest on land or water on account



When a Navy dirigible crashed in a storm, Mitchell made a statement to the press, charging the War Department and Navy with incompetence and negligence. He was court-martialed (above) and in 1926 resigned from the military.

of the degree of destruction which would be sustained by the country subjected to unrestricted air attack.”

Here was one of Mitchell’s most enduring points: Control of the air—and the threat of strategic bombing—might be sufficient all by itself to bring belligerent nations back from the brink. If that were true, he went on, then who would need armies and navies?

This image of Mitchell as the airpower prophet bears zero resemblance to that of Mitchell the air component commander at St. Mihiel. Mitchell wrote in his book, *Skyways*: “It is now realized that the hostile main army in the field is a false objective and the real objectives are the vital centers.” Taken alone, the vital-centers thesis seems to trump his wartime experience. Did Mitchell reverse himself and abandon his actual experience in wartime employment of airpower?

This is the true dilemma about Mitchell, but the first key is to consider the context. In his hope for a quick way to end war, Mitchell was an idealist. Some of it reflected the times. He was after all writing in the 1920s and 1930s, not long after the fatuous Kellogg–Briand Pact had “outlawed” war. It was a time when people believed in rational choice in statecraft. If the other fellow could see the cost, he might change his ways. Several sections of Mitchell’s books were laced with dreamy passages on how military airpower could

in peacetime perform all sorts of domestic functions from “patrolling against forest fires” to mapping, surveying, lifesaving, and “eliminating insect pests such as locusts and boll weevils.”

Percentages of Victory

The second key is to recall that Mitchell’s speculations all depended on a firm base: gaining control of the air first. He recommended a mix of 60 percent pursuit aircraft, 20 percent bombardment, and 20 percent observation aircraft for an air force, indicating clearly that he saw control of the air as a major task that would entail a major struggle. Mitchell was writing a decade before radar, better air defenses, and fast fighters changed the rules of the game. Still, his strategy depended most on building a strong air force. As in World War I, control of the air made everything possible: a threat to attack cities, or if it came to that, a way to dominate the battle on the ground or at sea.

Mitchell never closed the door on combined arms operations. In 1926, five days before he resigned his commission, Mitchell testified to Congress that, in the optimum national defense setup, “airpower would make

approximately 50 percent, the land forces 30 percent, and the sea forces 20 percent.”

Mitchell had many sides, positive and negative. With his use of the press and his lack of scruple about playing Congress, the President, the Army, and Navy against one another, Mitchell’s agitation and defiance surpassed anything Gen. Douglas MacArthur ever did.

There was also a quirky personal dimension to him, and it may explain a little about the real Billy Mitchell and why he walked into the court-martial. In July 1921, right in the middle of the *Ostfriesland* experiments, Mitchell’s wealthy wife, Caroline, left him. In the Washington of that day, divorce was a major event, and Mitchell’s was dramatic and public. One biographer described it as a “bitter struggle that could have erupted into a major scandal.” Apparently Mitchell’s marital “difficulties were common knowledge in Washington” and may have “made it easier for his opponents to dismiss Mitchell as irresponsible and unworthy of further advancement in the Army.”

That autumn, he got his boss fired in a showdown but failed to get the Air Service job for himself. Mason Patrick, the new Chief, sent Mitchell on a long European inspection tour. Mitchell flirted with resigning but backed down. Nonetheless, these episodes probably told him his options were limited. In 1923 he remarried, but well before then, Mitchell was man who had nothing to lose politically.

Mitchell will always be unique. He was a respected commander and a man who seized the chance to be America’s first combined force air component commander in 1918. He did it so well that he laid the foundation of American airpower. Mitchell was at his best when in command of air forces, either in France in 1918 or in the experiments he conducted in the early 1920s. He left later generations of airmen a wealth of experience on how to run air campaigns and air forces. That was what the real Billy Mitchell held most dear. ■

Rebecca Grant is president of IRIS, a research organization in Arlington, Va., and has worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Grant is a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association’s Aerospace Education Foundation. Her most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Schwarzkopf of Arabia,” appeared in the January 2001 issue.