

**He launched his crusade for airpower almost eighty years ago. His ideas live on in the armed forces of today.**

# The Spirit of Billy Mitchell

By Walter J. Boyne

**I**N TODAY'S cynical world, the very act of remembering a hero poses many problems. Invoking Billy Mitchell's name raises questions of relevance, accuracy, and purpose. Can a man who began his crusade for airpower nearly eighty years ago, whose finest hour came seventy years ago, and who died in relative obscurity sixty years ago, have more than symbolic meaning for us today? Is the symbol really accurate? Did Mitchell actually predict the future? And, most fundamental, given the passage of time and events and considering the technological, economic, social, and political revolutions that have transpired since his heyday, can anything Mitchell did or said be useful for today's United States Air Force?

The answer to all of these questions is a resounding "yes," for he molded what would become the US Air Force in a thousand ways that have been increasingly overlooked and need to be remembered. Today, USAF is riding the fourth section of a multistage rocket that Billy Mitchell launched by the sheer force of his personality and the breadth of his vision.

At the height of his fame, when he was tilting with the War Department and the Navy Department with equal enthusiasm, the term "Mitchellism" was coined by the press to symbolize the concept that airpower was now the dominant military factor and that sea and land forces were becoming subordinate. In the intervening years, the correctness of his thinking, the accuracy of his predictions, the risks he took, the sacrifices he so willingly made of his health and his career, and, by far the most important, the influence he had on his successors have conferred a new, higher, and entirely contemporary meaning on "Mitchellism."

Billy Mitchell's name conjures up different and mostly stereotyped images. For those with an interest in airpower, it brings to mind the visionary who sank battleships and paid the price for defying the War Department. Unfortunately, for far too many, the name Billy Mitchell is associated only with a grainy black-and-white movie showing Gary Cooper fighting a court-martial.

Brig. Gen. William L. Mitchell deserves better than this. So great was his impact on the Army Air Ser-

*Billy Mitchell, the spiritual father of the Air Force, led the fight for airpower after World War I and was court-martialed for his aggressive advocacy of the cause.*







*General Mitchell (center, with walking stick) poses with his staff in Koblenz, Germany, on January 15, 1919. His experiences during World War I crystallized his belief in airpower. Below, he walks through a Langley Field, Va., hangar with Secretary of the Navy Edwin Denby.*



vice and its successor organizations that the effect is still being felt. During Mitchell's meteoric military career, he charted new paths, set new standards, and influenced key leaders for decades to come. Mitchell was twenty years ahead of his time when he put forth his detailed vision of a hazardous future. More important, he knew that airpower was the answer to overcoming the danger. His impassioned campaign to tell his story had a quadruple-barreled impact on the modern Air Force, past, present, and future.

#### **Mitchell and the Past**

Billy Mitchell was born into privileged circumstances in Nice, France, on December 29, 1879. His father,

John L. Mitchell, became a US senator and would quietly smooth the way for his impetuous son's early military career. Commissioned as a second lieutenant at age eighteen, Billy Mitchell immediately got on the fast track by demonstrating his leadership and organizational skills in the Philippines and Alaska. Without a contracting officer's warrant, he managed to spend \$50,000 of US government money to build a telegraph line across Alaska—on an authorized budget of \$5,000. The overrun must not have hurt Mitchell; he came back a captain at age twenty-three, the youngest in the Army.

At thirty-two, Mitchell became the youngest officer ever appointed to the Army General Staff. While in

Washington, he felt the first attraction to aviation, seeing in it the future for his country and, not incidentally, for himself. Paying for his own flying lessons, he learned to fly in four Sunday sessions at the Curtiss Flying School, Newport News, Va., in 1915.

There have been disputes over his ability as a flyer—for example, Maj. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois always contended that Mitchell was not a "regular" Army flyer because he had not been through an Army flying school. (This was a somewhat ironic point for Foulois to make, given that he had taught himself to fly by corresponding with the Wright brothers.) On the other hand, one of the great pioneer test pilots, the record-setting





**MB-2 bombers fly in formation over Atlantic coastal waters in exercises intended to demonstrate the prowess of airplanes against battleships. Though fragile by today's standards, the MB-2s could carry more than a ton of ordnance.**

Lt. Lester J. Maitland, stated unequivocally that Mitchell "could fly anything with wings and fly it well."

Mitchell's flying catapulted him to prominence, and he became deputy chief of the Signal Corps Aviation Section in 1916, with the rank of major. This was his ticket to the top. He wangled his way to France as a military observer in March 1917. When the US declared war on Imperial Germany the next month, he soon established himself as the premier US aviation officer in France. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel in May and to colonel in August 1917 and received a rating as a Junior Military Aviator without the normal testing process.

Fluent in French, unlike most of his colleagues, Billy Mitchell became what today would be called a master networker—cementing ties, obtaining resources, making friends, and pledging help that he could only hope to deliver. Hugh "Boom" Trenchard, commander of the Royal Flying Corps (later, first Marshal of the Royal Air Force), became his mentor. He could not have chosen better.

Mitchell drew many ideas from Trenchard, especially the fundamental conclusion that airpower was primarily an instrument for offensive, not defensive, employment. Mitchell embraced Trenchard's concepts on supremacy in the air and demonstrated them as chief of the Air Service, 1st Brigade, and by the time of

the Saint-Mihiel offensive of September 1918 was chief of the Air Service, 1st Army, American Expeditionary Forces.

Mitchell commanded 1,476 aircraft and twenty balloons, assembled from 101 American, British, French, and Italian squadrons, in the greatest air offensive of the war. The battle of Saint-Mihiel was itself a bit of an anticlimax, as the Germans were in the process of evacuating the salient, but the air battle went as Mitchell had planned.



**Mitchell (arm raised) speaks with Gen. of the Armies John J. Pershing during an inspection of an MB-2. Mitchell's initial challenges to the Navy were met with ridicule, but he eventually got the chance to prove the might of airpower.**

## Challenge to the Navy

In the convulsive downsizing that followed World War I, Mitchell, who had achieved the grade of temporary brigadier general (a grade he would retain for all but ten months until April 1925), was one of the few officers not reduced in rank, much to the distress of longtime rival Foulois, who reverted to being a major. Yet the War Department regarded Mitchell as a loose cannon and placed him under the supervision of a nonflyer, Maj. Gen. Charles T. Menoher, the new Director of the Air Service.

It was at this point that Billy Mitchell set out on the path that would lead him to his greatest heights—and ultimately to his court-martial. Knowing he would never prevail over the stolid, conservative Army leaders of the time, Mitchell went public. He soon became a national figure as a witness at Congressional hearings. He expanded his audience with speeches and articles on his new ideas about airpower. Already in hot water with the Army, he next collided with the deep-water Navy by saying that airplanes could sink battleships.

The Navy's leadership ignored, ridiculed, or attacked Mitchell, depending on the issue, but he finally backed them into a corner with an open challenge while testifying before the House subcommittee on aviation. Mitchell announced that "1,000 bombardment airplanes can be built





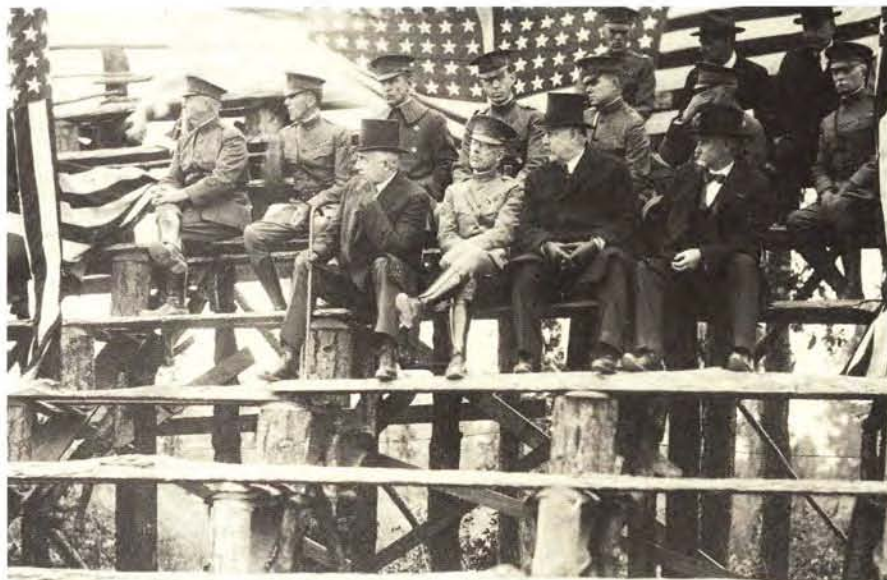
*To the Navy's dismay, the MB-2s and Handley Pages sank target after target in the demonstration off the Virginia Capes. The Navy benefited, however, because the demonstration prompted the service to push for aircraft carriers.*

and operated for about the price of one battleship." He declared that his airplanes could sink a battleship, and he invited the economy-minded Congress to see for itself. In his Congressional testimony, as in everything Mitchell did, lay the subliminal message that there should be an independent Air Force, equal with the Army and the Navy.

The Navy grudgingly agreed to a demonstration, providing as the targets some captured Imperial German Navy ships, including a submarine, a destroyer, a cruiser, and the toughest ship of all, the many-compartmented battleship *Ostfriesland*—thought by many to be unsinkable. The Navy also provided strict rules of engagement, designed to minimize Mitchell's chance of success.

Mitchell created the First Provisional Air Brigade at Langley Field, Va., equipping it with some 150 bombers and pursuit airplanes and almost 1,000 personnel—a considerable portion of the Air Service. The heavy bombs he knew he needed were not available. With typical foresight and tenacity, Mitchell induced the ordnance division to produce 2,000-pound bombs, based on a sketch he and two ordnance men drew during an afternoon's conversation.

The tests off the Virginia Capes in the fall of 1921 were carefully regulated, with many observers stationed nearby to make sure that the



*The controversy caused by Mitchell's advocacy of airpower went all the way to the top. President Warren G. Harding (center, with cane) and his staff viewed bombing tests from a hastily constructed viewing stand at Langley Field, Va.*

rules were followed. The Navy set up some procedures to hamper Mitchell's efforts, including limiting the size and number of bombs that could be dropped on any single sortie.

At the crucial moment, when it appeared the *Ostfriesland* might indeed be too tough a nut to crack, Mitchell violated the rules by sending in his twin-engine Martin bombers to drop six of the big bombs instead of the three they were allowed. A hit and several near misses split the seams of the tough old

German battleship, and she went down, to the horror of the assembled Navy brass. To add insult to injury, the seventh ship of Mitchell's formation, a Handley Page, dropped its 2,000 pounder into the foam and bubbles rising from the sunken ship.

Mitchell was vindicated, but it was the Navy itself that would benefit most from the tests, as they turned immediately to embrace the concept of aircraft carriers, which would dominate the naval war in the Pacific only twenty years later. Oddly enough, Mitchell's greatest contributions to the Air Service and its successor organizations, contributions that echo today, were made in a far less spectacular fashion.

### Impact on R&D

Despite the postwar collapse of the Air Service budget, Mitchell saw

to it that the maximum possible funds were given to McCook Field, Ohio, the ancestor not only of Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, but also Edwards AFB, Calif., Arnold Engineering Development Center, Arnold AFB, Tenn., and every other base where research and development work is done. Mitchell served as both whip and inspiration to the engineers he assigned to bring forth faster fighters and bigger bombers.

Mitchell knew that flying had to be sold to the public before it could be



sold to Congress and that record-setting would advance aviation technology, even as it gained public attention. He was wholeheartedly behind the great headline-making flights of the era, from the 1923 nonstop transcontinental flight in the Fokker T-2—Mitchell did not hesitate to buy from foreign sources when it suited his needs—to the 175-day trip around the world of the Douglas World Cruisers in 1924. On October 18, 1922, in his first flight in the beautiful little Curtiss R-6 biplane, Mitchell himself set a world absolute speed record of 222.97 mph.

Appearances to the contrary, Mitchell could not be everywhere and do everything even as he was leading the fight for an independent Air Force. He deliberately created a climate in the Air Service that was passed on to its successor services, one in which technology was recognized as the ore from which a war-winning air force could be refined. Most important, he inspired devotion in the airmen who would follow in his footsteps and keep research and development at the top of the priority list. His best choice, and a very loyal friend, was a young officer named Henry H. Arnold.

Mitchell's own career had run its course by the mid-1920s. Controversial testimony before Congressional committees, combined with intemperate speeches and articles calling for an independent Air Force, made him *persona non grata* with both the Navy and War Departments. Demoted to colonel and exiled to a minor post in San Antonio, Tex., he continued to lash out. When the Navy dirigible *Shenandoah* was torn apart in a severe squall over Byesville, Ohio, Mitchell released a 6,000-word statement to the press. The September 5, 1925, statement attacked the War Department and the Navy Department for incompetence and for seeking publicity at the cost of tolerating dangerous flights. He also predicted his own court-martial.

### The Morrow Board

In a preemptive move designed to moderate anything Mitchell might say at his court-martial, President Calvin Coolidge set up a board under Dwight W. Morrow "for the purpose of making a study of the best means of developing and applying aircraft in national defense." Mitch-



**General Mitchell predicted his own court-martial. His aggressive promotion of airpower brought it about. At the trial, his military supporters lined up to speak on his behalf despite the risk of damage to their careers.**

ell's testimony before the board was measured and brilliant, laying out with clarity the specter of the Pacific war that would come only sixteen years later. He predicted the rise of Japanese strength and later foretold its Sunday-morning attack on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines. He made the argument, accurate until 1944, that aircraft carriers could not operate against landbased aviation. He saw war as global and imminent, and he knew that airpower was the only way to master the situation.

And it was President Coolidge himself who ordered Mitchell's court-martial under charges of insubordination under the 96th Article of War ("conduct of a nature to bring discredit on the military service"). The trial lasted seven weeks, most of which was devoted to a discussion of Mitchell's concept of airpower. The verdict of guilty was a foregone conclusion, and Mitchell was sentenced to be suspended from rank, command, and duty, with a forfeiture of all pay and allowances for five years. President Coolidge, in an uncharacteristic fit of generosity, later reduced this to forfeiture of half his pay and allowances.

Billy Mitchell refused the offer and resigned on February 1, 1926. All through the court-martial proceedings, Mitchell had the staunch support of "Hap" Arnold and such officers as Carl Spaatz, Herbert Dargue, Robert Olds, William Gillmore, Hor-

ace Hickam, and others. Each put his career on the line for Mitchell even though they knew he would be convicted. After the trial, Arnold was exiled to become commanding officer of the 16th Observation Squadron, Fort Riley, Kan. The assignment was intended to be the end of his career.

Mitchell continued to campaign in speeches and articles. "Hap" Arnold, for his part, soldiered on, his leadership qualities inevitably propelling him to the top, regardless of residual resentment about his unflagging support for Mitchell.

More important than Arnold's loyalty, however, was his comprehension of Mitchell's fascination with technology. Early in his tour as Army Air Corps Chief, Arnold began soliciting the ideas and the company of the top scientists in the country.

Eventually, he enlisted the assistance of such stellar names as Theodore von Kármán, Hugh L. Dryden, Frank Wattendorf, Hsue-shen Tsien, Vladimir K. Zworykin, and many others for the Scientific Advisory Group, later transformed into the Scientific Advisory Board. These men and others created first "Where We Stand" and then "Toward New Horizons," studies that addressed state-of-the-art technology and put forth a blueprint for the development of the postwar Air Force.

It is important to note that neither Mitchell nor Arnold had the scien-



tific competence to write such reports; they had, instead, the far more vital ability to see that the reports were needed, recognize who could produce them, and sympathetically enlist their support. The officers Arnold picked to work with the scientists were equally well chosen, among them such men as James H. Doolittle, Donald L. Putt, and Laurence C. Craigie. They knew the importance of science and of scientists.

Again in the spirit of Billy Mitchell, Arnold picked promising young officers who understood the requirements of technology and saw that they were given a track to top positions. Doing so cost him friends. Comrades who had served with him, and who were now passed over, resented his choices. But Arnold knew he was not running a popularity contest; he was building an independent Air Force.

The constructive culture created by Mitchell and Arnold made it possible for R&D positions to be established for such men as Bernard A. Schriever and his successors. From that foundation grew the intricate

*Mitchell's supporters included entertainer, political satirist, and aviation enthusiast Will Rogers (below, left) and Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker (right), Medal of Honor recipient and top US ace of World War I. Rickenbacker called Mitchell's guilty verdict "a crime against posterity."*



structure of developments leading first to a fleet of ICBMs and then to the exploitation of space technology. The subsequent development

of satellites that harvest intelligence on an unprecedented scale can be attributed directly to the encouraging climate given research and de-

velopment by Mitchell, Arnold, and their spiritual successors.

### The Future Air Force

Mitchell and Arnold successfully established the service that, as the Army Air Forces, would be vital in winning World War II. It is less well understood that they achieved this through an unprecedented appreciation for technology and a willingness to gamble on the brains of men they respected.

Neither Mitchell nor Arnold would have claimed to have been scientists, and both would have admitted readily that they did not understand the engineering underlying the equipment the scientists promised to deliver. However, both understood that the greatest scientists in the world cannot contribute to national defense unless they are invited to do so and are then given an environment in which they can comfortably function.

When von Kármán told Arnold that he was not certain he could conform to the customs of the Pentagon, Arnold quickly told him not to worry—he would see that the Pentagon conformed to von Kármán. That was Mitchellism at its finest! ■

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*Walter J. Boyne, formerly director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D. C., is a retired Air Force colonel and author. He has written more than 400 articles and several books, the most recent of which was Silver Wings. His last article for Air Force Magazine, "Weird, Wonderful Warplanes," appeared in the June 1975 issue.*